

# [PDF] Ice Blue

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**Description:**

**Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.** Summer Hawthorne wasn't having a particularly good night, though she smiled and said all the right things to all the right people. Someone was watching her. She'd been feeling it all evening long, but she had absolutely no idea who it was. Or why.

The opening reception at the elegant Sansone Museum was small and exclusive—only the very rich and very powerful were invited to the tiny museum in the Santa Monica Mountains to view the collection of exquisite Japanese ceramics. And even if she wasn't particularly fond of one of those

guests, he'd have no reason to watch her.

Her assistant, Micah Jones, resplendent in deep purple, sidled up to her. "I'm leaving you, my darling. This is winding down, and no one will miss me. I'm assuming everything's going well, and I've got an offer I can't refuse." He grinned.

Summer jumped, startled. "Evil man," she said lightly. "Abandoning me in my time of need. Go ahead. I've got everything under control. Even his holiness."

Micah glanced at their guest of honor and shuddered dramatically. "I can stay and shield you."

"Not on your life! The True Realization Fellowship and their slimy leader are just a bunch of harmless crackpots. Hollywood's religion du jour. Besides, you've been celibate for too long, or so you've been complaining."

"If you'd wear anything but black you might get lucky, too," Micah said, candid as ever. "Even so, you look marvelous."

"You lie," she said, ignoring her uneasiness. "But I love you, anyway. Despite the fact that you're ditching the reception early."

Micah smiled his dazzling smile. "True love waits for no man." He leaned down and gave her an exuberant kiss. "You know your room's ready for you if you need it. Just ignore any whoops of pleasure coming from my bedroom."

"you're a very bad man," she said affectionately.

"I'm fine, I promise you. You can enjoy yourself in private."

He blew her a kiss, sauntering off through the crowd, and she watched him go, ignoring her sudden, irrational pang of unease. Feeling the eyes digging into her back once more.

She was half tempted to call Micah back, ask him to wait. The reception would be over in another half hour, and then she could follow him down from the museum, and this odd, tense feeling would vanish.

But she hadn't gotten this far in her life by giving in to irrational fears. It simply had to be because of their esteemed guest of honor, his holiness the Shirosama. He had a reason to watch her out of his colorless eyes—she was standing between him and the prize Summer's foolish mother, Lianne, had promised him. And the Shirosama had not gotten to where he was, as head of a worldwide spiritual movement, without knowing how to get what he wanted.

He wanted her Japanese bowl, probably as much as she didn't want him to have it—the bowl her Japanese nanny had given to her a short while before she'd been killed in a car accident. It was one more betrayal from her self-absorbed mother, something she was used to by now. Summer had loaned it to the exclusive museum where she worked, just to keep it away from the religious charlatan for as long as she could. But sooner or later the creepy, charming Shirosama was going to get it, and there wasn't a whole lot she could do about it. At least she'd put it off for the time being.

But it wasn't the Shirosama who was watching her, or any of his white-robed minions—not as far as she could tell. She could feel the eyes boring into her back, and she turned, trying to catch whoever it was. Certainly not the elderly Asian couple by the fourteenth century incense burners. Not the tall, slender man with the sunglasses, who seemed much more interested in the impressive cleavage of the blonde he was talking to than in the exhibit. Maybe she was imagining it.

She recognized only half of the elegantly dressed guests who filled the gallery for this private opening, and none would have any reason to be interested in the lowly junior curator at the Sansone Museum. Her connection to Lianne and Ralph Lovitz and their Hollywood lifestyle was generally unknown, and by southern California standards she was totally ordinary looking, something she did her best to cultivate.

"His holiness wishes to speak with you."

She was very good at hiding her emotions, and she turned to face the monk, if that's what he was. For a group of ascetics, the followers of the True Realization Fellowship tended to be particularly well fed, and the plump young man in front of her was no different. He had the same round face, shaved head and faintly sanctimonious look they all did, and it made her want to stomp on his sandaled feet.

She was being childish and she knew it. She could come up with an excuse, but the reception was drawing to a close, the trustees were seeing to the departing guests and she had no real reason to avoid their guest of honor.

"Of course," she said, trying to add a note of warmth to her voice. Someone had trashed her house three nights ago, taking nothing, but she'd known instinctively what they'd been looking for. The Japanese bowl they coveted was right in front of them now, guarded by an excellent security system.

She crossed the room, feeling like a prisoner on her way to execution. She could still feel those eyes boring into her back, but all the Shirosama's posse, including the man himself, were in front of her. She glanced behind, but there was no one except the blonde and her date. Summer decided she must be paranoid, looking behind her for trouble when it was right in front of her.

"Dr. Hawthorne," his holiness greeted her in his soft voice. "You do me honor."

It was the softest of barbs—he knew very well that he was the one conferring honor on the place, at least by conventional wisdom. The Shirosama was highly sought after; obtaining his presence at a social event was a great coup.

Unlike his followers, he hadn't shaved his head—his pure white hair was long and flowing to his shoulders, a perfect match to his paper-white skin and pale, pink eyes. His white robes draped his rounded body, and his hands were soft and plump. Charismatic to those easily swayed, like her ditzzy mother. Harmless. Unless he was thwarted, and Summer was thwarting him.

But she knew how to play the game. "You honor *us*, your holiness." She didn't even trip over the words.

"And this is the bowl your mother spoke of?, he said softly. "I wonder that it has no provenance, and yet you still put it in the exhibit."

He knew as well as she did that she'd put it on display to keep it out of his hands. "We're researching its background, your holiness," she said, the absolute truth. "In the meantime a piece of such singular beauty deserves to be seen, and we were ready to open an exhibit of Japanese ceramics. It seemed only logical to show it."

"Only logical," he echoed. "I would be very interested in anything you might discover about the piece. I am somewhat an expert in ceramics, and I've never seen anything that particular shade of blue. Perhaps you might let me borrow it, examine it more closely, and I could help you with your research."

"you're very kind," she murmured. "But I'm certain the piece has little monetary worth—it was simply a gift from my nanny, and for that reason I cherish it. If in fact it does have considerable intrinsic value, then I would return it to the Japanese government."

There was no shadow in the Shirosama's benevolent smile. "You are as generous and honorable as your mother."

Summer resisted a snort. It wasn't enough that Lianne was funneling huge sums of money into the True Realization Fellowship, which seemed to have an insatiable need for cash. They weren't getting Summer's Japanese bowl, no matter how much they seemed to want it. She knew why Lianne wanted to get rid of it. Ralph had told her it was valuable, and Lianne had always been jealous of Summer's nanny. Hana-san had been the mother Lianne had never had time to be, loving Summer, protecting her, teaching her what she needed to know and listening to her. The bowl had been one of the keepsakes she'd given Summer when Lianne had finally managed to fire her and send Summer off to boarding school, and Summer had promised that she'd keep it safe until Hana came for it. But Hana had died, unexpectedly.

And shallow, beautiful Lianne wanted to hand it over to her current guru. Over Summer's dead body.

"Your mother has expressed great sorrow that you haven't been to see her recently," he added in his soft, rolling voice. "She wishes to make peace with you."

"How very kind," Summer murmured. Lianne Lovitz preferred her daughter to be as far away as

possible—it was damn hard to convince the world you were in your early forties if you had a daughter in her late twenties hanging around. If the Shirosama wanted her to say anything more, she wasn't going to; her relationship with her mother was none of his business.

He turned to glance back at the ceramic bowl. "You know that she promised this to me?"

Nothing like coming straight to the point. "And you know it was not hers to promise, your holiness," Summer said with exquisite politeness.

"I see," the Shirosama murmured, though Summer had no doubt her mother had filled him in on all this.

"But do you not think it should be returned to its rightful place in Japan? To the shrine where it belongs?", "Almost everything in this room should be back in Japan," she said. *Including you*, she added silently.

"Perhaps I should be in touch with the Ministry of Fine Arts and see if they're interested."

It was rare to see someone with no pigmentation in their skin turn paler still. "I doubt that's necessary. I will be returning to Japan in a short while—I can make inquiries for you if you wish."

She bowed as Hana had taught her. "That would be very kind of you," she replied with exquisite courtesy. She'd heard rumors that the Shirosama and his Fellowship... --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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