

LOVE'S PREY

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

ICE

I am fourteen and I haven't smiled in years. My mother used to punch my face for that.

So when the new neighbor boy approaches me and asks, "Will you pose for me? I'd like to paint your portrait," I shoot him a glacial look.

I've heard about this hot shot. All the girls have been talking about him for weeks. They say he's originally from up North, all the way from the border of Russia and Mongolia. He's studying Western oil painting, but failed to secure a place at the top art school in the country last year. This will be his second try. I wonder what brought him to this retrograde, small Southern town. He must be some kind of an idiot to move here.

"You have distinctive features," the boy adds.

I glance around, still assuming he's referring to someone else. For sure, he couldn't have meant me. I have the worse fashion sense in town. My gray, baggy outfit is almost twice my size, and one of my shoes promises to expose my toe soon. I don't know what he means by "distinctive features," but I have no disillusion about my looks, which are a far cry from desirable. I don't have a hint of the rosy hue of the cheeks that the townspeople mark as the standard trait of beauty. All I have are faint, visible, bluish

veins underneath my pale skin. But that's not the worst part about me.

The cliché says eyes are the windows to the soul. If anyone looks into my windows, they'll catch a glimpse of a permanent mass of ice from the North Pole. "The coldest eyes I've ever seen," the neighbors whisper among themselves, but I hear them. I see everything. I hear everything.

In the narrow alley where the wind carries the scent of jasmine, the boy and I are alone. When I'm sure his request is directed toward me, I scowl at him. How dare he ask such a thing? Pose for him? A model? If he thinks he can make fun of me, he has targeted the wrong girl! He holds my glare and doesn't back down like the others.

He hasn't a clue.

I watch a sunny smile ripple across his tanned face. My look turns icier, but his smile gets bigger, as if he's trying to soothe a feral cat about to pounce.

"It'll be fun," he says, "and not difficult at all. You'll be sitting in a comfortable chair for a few hours after school and listening to music. I assure you, I have excellent taste."

I wear suspicion as my second skin, but the music he promises makes my blood flow with desire. There is no radio in my apartment. I dart my eyes to the narrow dusky sky behind him, inhale sharply, and instantly I've controlled my breathing and suppressed the longing.

I decide the boy isn't poking fun at me, but I still can't grasp why a gorgeous guy like him wants to portray someone like me, someone everyone else avoids. A look of increased interest hovers on his face. He's caught my moment of yearning. Damn his painter's eyes!

"No!" I say with finality, casting him one more spiteful look before I quickly brush past him.

After that encounter in the alley, he appears everywhere I go. When I walk along the paved passage underneath his window, he leans on the old stone rail outside his studio, whistling at me. I never look up. I carry on my usual ways—never acknowledging anyone's existence except my own.

But when the night is deep, I watch him.

His name is Kai. He recently moved into the vacant room of a two-story, white complex across from my gray apartment building that is more reminiscent of a series of prison cells. From the window in my room on the third floor, I can see part of what's inside his second-floor studio: a classical guitar, a canvas on a standing easel, and on the side wall a portrait of a girl, who looks a few years older than me.

He never closes his door or windows. The light burns through the space like a little sun shining just for his world.

"Kai says lighting is important," explains the dove-eyed girl, who lives on the first floor on my side of the building. Her friends often gather on her terrace. From my balcony, I can hear every bit

of their gossip, unbeknownst to them. I excel at these sorts of things. I'm sly as a panther, especially at night.

"My sister says Kai is a bad influence on young girls," a girl, who has a hooked nose, says jealously.

"Doesn't your sister go to his studio too?" asks Dove-Eyes. "I see her there often."

Kai has many frequent visitors. Day and night, girls and boys flow in and out of his studio like bugs.

"How old is he? He looks older than us," a new girl's voice asks.

"He's seventeen," says Dove-Eyes.

"Oh." A few girls let out a hopeful, collective sigh.

They don't even know that boy and they're already smitten. I shake my head in disgust. I'll never go weak at the knees for a boy.

I retreat into my dark room, barefoot, and move across to the window like a shadow. Around the edge of the curtain, I stare down at the boy's studio.

As usual, he has a full house. Laughter and teenagers' notoriously loud chatter spill out from his room, along with a torrent of light. Standing alone in a land of gloom, I wonder how seven yards of space between us can so divide two different universes.

The blanket of noise from the studio dies out as the sound of classical guitar chords dominates the night air. Then Kai starts singing. His voice is bright and deep. He must know how beautifully he sings and doesn't mind showing it off.

While observing him, I remind myself to watch my back. My mother might barge into my room at any time. If she catches me, she'll slap me, and tell anyone who will listen that under my cold skin, I'm really a bitch dog in heat.

I treat my mother like a desert scorpion, the most lethal kind. But she thinks highly of herself. She complains that she's too pretty to be stuck with a distant husband who's three inches shorter than she and a gaggle of ungrateful children. I consider myself more ill fated than she, for I'm the only of her children still stuck with her. My brother, who is six years older than I, is seldom home, and my sister, older by four years, has gone off to a city college. Most nights at the dinner table, I have to endure my mother's whining alone.

She's repeatedly made it clear that one of her life's missions is to take me down. Apparently, I caused her great labor pains and made her gain twenty pounds afterwards. From my birth until now, I've been nothing but a pain. But I think it's the opposite.

And what would bring me down faster than catching me with my pants down? It'll be the end of me if Kai and everyone else hear from my mother how I secretly, lustfully watch this hot teenage boy.

I return to my desk and turn the light on. Before sitting down to read a poem, I go to close the window, with the intention of checking to see if my light can draw Kai out like a moth to the flame again.

And there he is, standing by his window, looking up at mine. Pretending not to see him, I pull the two panes of the window back with a loud bang and adjust the dark brown curtain, ensuring it covers every inch of exposed glass. Peering through the slit in the curtain, I can see that the boy's gaze is still fixed in my direction. Can he really be drawn to me?

The next day, in order to test my theory, I go to the living room balcony to pretend to water the plants. My mother has built a small patio garden there. She'd certainly hit me if I touched her roses, lilies, and orchids, even if I watered them. I come out here only when she isn't around. Now I'm out here to see whether the boy will follow me outside again.

The moment I step onto the balcony, Kai steps out of his studio, leans on the stone rail in the open corridor, and watches me. My years of self-training allow me to see more than most through the fringe of my eyes.

Sensing the weight of his smoldering gaze on me, I feel my pulse quicken and my heart flutter like a wild thing. I can't look ahead. If I do, I'll meet his gaze. As he plays my game, all I can do is keep ignoring him, to show my disinterest.

"Hey Xirena," he calls. Greeting me loudly, he forces me to look straight at him. "How you doing?" He flashes a cheerful grin.

I hold his gaze for a second. How can anyone have such a cloudless smile?

"Fine!" I say, hoping that my icy look bites him like the harsh wind. I have every right to punish him for disturbing my small

sense of peace. But if I wanted peace, why did I come to the balcony to lure him out? Ever since I was a little girl, my family always called me a troublemaker. Maybe I really am.

As I narrow my eyes at him, panic kicks in me. What is he going to say next? What if I don't have a sharp comeback, and instead murmur something dumb?

I'll not give him the opportunity to try me out. So I take the advice of Sun Tzu, one of the best wartime strategists, and decide to flee. Sun Tzu says, "When you can't win, run!"

I put the water pot down on the rail with a loud clang and leave the balcony. I head straight to my room and sink into a chair, blood pounding in my ears.

Retreat to your ice castle, I command myself. As I step into my mental fortress, Kai's male power reduces to zero, and his alluring smile sinks like a wrecked ship under a sea of ice. I begin to regret fleeing from him, which he might take as my admitting defeat.

My thoughts keep drifting to him. I sigh with disgust. I'm like a dog that keeps digging for a bone. The truth of the bone is that Kai wants something from me. I have no idea what it is, but I'll make sure he doesn't get it.

Over the next few days I drop the basic courtesies and let his bright greetings bounce off the wall.

But then comes one day after school, when there is no warm greeting or bright whistle from the second floor corridor. The usual loud voices and blasting music are absent from his studio as well.

Where the heck is the peacock? My eyes roll slowly sideways toward his studio. His door is closed. A surge of disappointment rushes through me. I enter my apartment building in a sudden bad mood. The game between the boy and me has ended before it started, for I've miscalculated the insistence of my opponent.

I insert the key into the lock of my apartment, my mood turning darker. I summon massive ice to modulate my emotion. The familiar frigid air rises, enveloping me. I let it take me over, turning me again to its kind. I'm now equipped to face another dark day in my mother's lair.

I turn the doorknob, pushing the heavy wooden door ajar. My mother's giggles mixing with a young boy's lush, magnetic voice pour out through the crack. The boy's voice sounds familiar, but I don't give it a second thought because the woman's flirtatious, girlish laughter turns my stomach.

Obviously, she is entertaining a new guest. I never greet anyone. All they get from me is coldness shooting from my eyes. So under the circumstances, it'd be wise to withdraw without being detected. Why invite another beating, while my other wounds are still fresh?

Just when I'm about to pull back the door quietly and retreat, a hand grabs the doorframe and blocks it from closing. "What the—?" I curse under my breath. My eyes fall on a young man's strong hand.

While I'm pondering its owner—you don't get to see beautiful hands often in this town—the door swings fully open. And I curse

myself more. I could have gotten away if I hadn't been drawn by the hand.

Kai looks down at me with a dazzling smile. My eyes widen, lighting up at the sight of him before returning to their icy state. The boy winks at me, reminding me that his painter's eyes are a high-resolution camera that has captured the moment of truth that I'd give everything to conceal.

"Hey, Xirena, how was school?" he asks, a smile tugging at his lips.

While I'm dazed, he steps closer, his proximity making it impossible for my brain to function properly. A lock of his ebony hair drops to his forehead. One of his dark eyebrows arches slightly to tease me. I can't help but let my eyes rove him over. His fine-boned nose is higher than Chinese. Is he truly a mixed blood, since they say he's originally from the border of Mongolia? His cheekbones are also stronger and more graceful than most Asian men's. His curvy, sensual mouth is soft, and I muse that it must feel warm too. As I stare at his lips, they part in invitation, showing a white smile.

I blink, tearing my gaze from his mouth and moving to a less dangerous zone. But that doesn't do me any good. His broad shoulders and tanned skin display immense male power. I snarl at myself for ogling him, just as my eyes involuntarily find his chest pressing tight against his black shirt.

Xirena, show some dignity! I tell myself sternly while I quickly dart my eyes away. But then they're caught in his.

His beautiful, darkly dangerous, seductive eyes lock into mine. At the last moment before becoming lost in them, I escape their snare.

I try to find scolding words and make an impatient, dismissive gesture to cover up my disorientation. That's when I spot my mother moving into view. The physical sickness I felt earlier returns. Frost coats my eyes.

"School's fine," I answer icily and stare off into the distance.

Neither Kai nor my mother exists in my world anymore. I step forward, expecting the boy to step aside. I don't give road rights to anyone, but he doesn't back down. I brake just in time, before I collide with his wall of flesh. I don't want to look as if I've thrown myself into his arms, even by accident.

He lets out soft, amused laughter.

I look up at him irritably. I hope his sensitive musician's senses won't hear the sound of my heartbeat, fluttering faster than the wings of a hummingbird.

Under my glare, he stops laughing, but the laugh stays in his eyes. He gestures politely and steps aside to let me pass, his eyes never leaving my face.

My mother looks daggers at me from behind Kai. I ignore her.

"I promised your mother I'd portray her," Kai says. "I'll be seeing you more often then. Hope you don't mind."

"It's none of her business!" The words slap through her gritted teeth.

Kai looks surprised and uncomfortable.

I head straight toward my room. My ears have switched to open receivers, listening to catch the boy's next moves.

He's out the door like a flash, and the sound of his footsteps running down the stairs echoes back. I'm picturing how he moves, conjuring up the images I saw once when he strode the long corridor outside his studio. He moves with grace like a leopard. His long, strong legs—stop! I'm already in enough trouble without my mind wandering over his legs!

A burst of merry whistles from Kai doesn't jolt me from my reverie, but my mother's smack does. "Short life, why must I put up with you?" She lays her hands on her shapely hips after slapping me.

Disregarding the burning sensation on my face, and wearing a bored expression, I move away from her, enter my room, and close the door. In less than a second, she kicks the door open with an explosive sound. I jump away just in time to avoid being hit in the face by the heavy wood.

"You don't shut the door while you stay under my roof and eat my food!" she says.

I make my way toward my rugged, dented wooden desk and open a textbook that I keep there for situations like this. I start reading the math on the page, solving a difficult equation in my head, and then I turn the page and study the next question.

My mother stands in the doorway, glaring at me like I'm dog shit. She grows bored after a minute or two, knowing from years

of experience that she won't get much of an interesting reaction from me. "Dead thing!" she spits before she retreats to the kitchen.

I toss down the textbook and pick up a half-broken, hand-held mirror. I seldom look at myself in the mirror. There isn't too much to see. But I'd like to take a look at myself now. I need to decipher the way Kai looked at me before he took off.

No matter how I change the angle in the hope of capturing one merit of my features in the mirror, I fail miserably. I see only a pair of dark, ancient eyes dominating a heart-shaped, pale face. The irony is, I'm not a predator but prey—prey with wolf-like cold eyes.