

The Snow Queen

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Kay

THEY STOOD TOGETHER WITHOUT TOUCHING, watching the snow fall. The sudden storm prolonging winter had surprised the city; little moved in the broad streets below them. Ancient filigreed lamps left from another century threw patterned wheels of light into the darkness, illumining the deep white silence crusting the world. Gerda, not hearing the silence, spoke. "They look like white rose petals endlessly falling." Kay said nothing. He glanced at his watch, then at the mirror across the room. The torchieres gilded them: a lovely couple, the mirror said. In the gentle light Gerda's sunny hair looked like polished bronze; his own, shades paler, seemed almost white. Some trick of shadow flattened Gerda's face, erased its familiar hollows. Her petal-filled eyes were summer blue. His own face, with sharp bones at cheek and jaw, dark eyes beneath pale brows, looked, he thought, wild and austere: a monk's face, a wizard's face. He searched for some subtlety in Gerda's, but it would not yield to shadow. She wore a short black dress; on her it seemed incongruous, like black in a flower.

He commented finally, "Every time you speak, flowers fall from

your mouth."

She looked at him, startled. Her face regained contours; they were graceful but uncomplex. She said, "What do you mean?" Was he complaining? Was he fanciful? She blinked, trying to see what he meant.

"You talk so much of flowers," he explained patiently. "Do you want a garden? Should we move to the country?"

"No," she said, horrified, then amended: "Only if— Do you want to? If we were in the country, there would be nothing to do but watch the snow fall. There would be no reason to wear this dress. Or these shoes. But do you want—"

"No," he said shortly. His eyes moved away from her; he jangled coins in his pocket. She folded her arms. The dress had short puffed sleeves, like a little girl's dress. Her arms looked chilled, but she made no move away from the cold, white scene beyond the glass. After a moment he mused, "There's a word I've been trying all day to think of. A word in a puzzle. Four letters, the clue is: the first word schoolboys conjugate."

"Schoolboys what?"

"Conjugate. Most likely Latin."

"I don't know any Latin," she said absently.

"I studied some... but I can't remember the first word I was taught. How could anyone remember?"

"Did you feed the angelfish?"

"This morning."

"They eat each other if they're not fed."

"Not angelfish."

"Fish do."

"Not all fish are cannibals."

"How do you know not angelfish in particular? We never let them go hungry; how do we really know?"

He glanced at her, surprised. Her hands tightened on her arms; she looked worried again. By fish? he wondered. Or was it a school of fish swimming through deep, busy waters? He touched her arm; it felt cold as marble. She smiled quickly; she loved being touched. The school of fish darted away; the deep waters were empty.

"What word," he wondered, "would you learn first in a language? What word would people need first? Or have needed, in the beginning of the world? Fire, maybe. Food, most likely. Or the name of a weapon?"

"Love," she said, gazing at the snow, and he shook his head impatiently.

"No, no—cold is more imperative than love; hunger overwhelms it. If I were naked in the snow down there, cold would override everything; my first thought would be to warm myself before I died. Even if I saw you walking naked toward me, life would take precedence over love."

"Then cold," she said. Her profile was like marble, flawless, unblinking. "Four letters, the first word in the world."

He wanted suddenly to feel her smooth marble cheek under his lips, kiss it into life. He said instead, "I can't remember the Latin word

for cold." She looked at him, smiling again, as if she had felt his impulse in the air between them. His thoughts veered off-balance, tugged toward her fine, flushed skin and delicate bones, something nameless, blind and hungry in him reaching toward another nameless thing. She said,

"There's the cab."

It was a horse-drawn sleigh; the snow was too deep for ordinary means. Had she been smiling, he wondered, because she had seen the cab? He kissed her anyway, lightly on the cheek, before she turned to get her coat, thinking how long he had known her and how little he knew her and how little he knew of how much or little there was in her to know.

Gerda

They arrived at Selene's party fashionably late. She had a vast flat with an old-fashioned ballroom. Half the city was crushed into it, despite the snow. Prisms of ice dazzled in the chandeliers; not even the hundred candles in them could melt their glittering, frozen jewels. On long tables, swans carved of ice held hothouse berries, caviar, sherbet between their wings. A business acquaintance attached himself to Kay; Gerda, drifting toward champagne, was found by Selene.

"Gerda!" She kissed air enthusiastically around Gerda's face. "How are you, angel? Such a dress. So innocent. How do you get away

with it?"

"With what?"

"And such a sense of humor. Have you met Maurice? Gerda, Maurice Crow."

"Call me Bob," said Maurice Crow to Gerda, as Selene flung her fruity voice into the throng and hurried after it.

"Why?"

Maurice Crow chuckled. "Good question." He had a kindly smile, Gerda thought; it gentled his thin, aging, beaky face. "If you were named Maurice, wouldn't you rather be called Bob?"

"I don't think so," Gerda said doubtfully. "I think I would rather be called my name."

"That's because you're beautiful. A beautiful woman makes any name beautiful."

"I don't like my name. It sounds like something to hold stockings up with. Or a five-letter word from a Biblical phrase." She glanced around the room for Kay. He stood in a ring of brightly dressed women; he had just made them laugh. She sighed without realizing it. "And I'm not really beautiful. This is just a disguise."

Maurice Crow peered at her more closely out of his black, shiny eyes. He offered her his arm; after a moment she figured out what to do with it. "You need a glass of champagne." He patted her hand gently. "Come with me."

"You see, I hate parties."

"Ah."

"And Kay loves them."

"And you," he said, threading a sure path among satin and silk and clouds of tulle, "love Kay."

"I have always loved Kay."

"And now you feel he might stop loving you? So you come here to please him."

"How quickly you understand things. But I'm not sure if he is pleased that I came. We used to know each other so well. Now I feel stupid around him, and slow, and plain, even when he tells me I'm not. It used to be different between us."

"When?"

She shrugged. "Before. Before the city began taking little pieces of him away from me. He used to bring me wildflowers he had picked in the park. Now he gives me blood-red roses once a year. Some days his eyes never see me, not even in bed. I see contracts in his eyes, and the names of restaurants, expensive shoes, train schedules. A train schedule is more interesting to him than I am."

"To become interesting, you must be interested."

"In Kay? Or in trains?"

"If," he said, "you can no longer tell the difference, perhaps it is Kay who has grown uninteresting."

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "Never to me." She had flushed. With the quick, warm color in her face and the light spilling from the icy prisms onto her hair, into her eyes, she caused Maurice Crow to hold her glass too long under the champagne fountain. "He is beautiful and brilliant, and we have loved each other since we were

children. But it seems that, having grown up, we no longer recognize one another." She took the overflowing glass from Maurice Crow's hand and drained it. Liquid from the dripping glass fell beneath her chaste neckline, rolled down her breast like icy tears. "We are both in disguise."

The Snow Queen

Neva entered late. She wore white satin that clung to her body like white clings to the calla lily. White peacock feathers sparkling with faux diamonds trailed down her long ivory hair. Her eyes were black as the night sky between the winter constellations. They swept the room, picked out a face here: Gerda's—How sweet, Neva thought, to have kept that expression, like one's first kiss treasured in tissue paper—and there: Kay's. Her eyes were wide, very still. The young man with her said something witty. She did not hear. He tried again, his eyes growing anxious. She watched Kay tell another story; the women around him—doves, warblers, a couple of trumpeting swans—laughed again. He laughed with them, reluctant but irresistibly amused by himself. He lifted champagne to his lips; light leaped from the cut crystal. His pale hair shone like the silk of Neva's dress; his lips were shaped cleanly as the swan's wing. She waited, perfectly still. Lowering his glass, the amused smile tugging again at his lips, he saw her standing in the archway across the room. To his eye she was alone; the importunate young lapdog beside her did not exist. So his look told her, as she drew at it with the

immense and immeasurable pull of a wayward planet wandering too close to someone's cold, bright, inconstant moon. The instant he would have moved, she did, crossing the room to join him before his brilliant, fluttering circle could scatter. Like him, she preferred an audience. She waited in her outer orbit, composed, mysterious, while he told another story. This one had a woman in it—Gerda—and something about angels or fish.

"And then," he said, "we had an argument about the first word in the world."

"Coffee," guessed one woman, and he smiled appreciatively.

"No," suggested another.

"It was for a crossword puzzle. The first word you learn to conjugate in Latin."

"But we always speak French in bed," a woman murmured. "My husband and I."

Kay's eyes slid to Neva. Her expression remained changeless; she offered no word. He said lightly, "No, no, *ma chere*, one conjugates a verb; one has conjugal relations with one's spouse. Or not, as the case may be."

"Do people still?" someone wondered. "How boring."

"To conjugate," Neva said suddenly in her dark, languid voice, "means to inflect a verb in an orderly fashion through all its tenses. As in: *amo, amas, amat*. I love, you love—"

"But that's it!" Kay cried. "The answer to the puzzle. How could I have forgotten?"

"Love?" someone said perplexedly. Neva touched her brow

delicately.

"I cannot," she said, "remember the Latin word for dance."

"You do it so well," Kay said a moment later, as they glided onto the floor. So polished it was that the flames from the chandeliers seemed frozen underfoot, as if they danced on stars. "And no one studies Latin anymore."

"I never tire of learning," Neva said. Her gloved hand lay lightly on his shoulder, close to his neck. Even in winter his skin looked warm, burnished by tropical skies, endless sun. She wanted to cover that warmth with her body, draw it into her own white-marble skin. Her eyes flicked constantly around the room over his shoulder, studying women's faces. "Who is Gerda?" she asked, then knew her: the tall, beautiful childlike woman who watched Kay with a hopeless, forlorn expression, as if she had already lost him.

"She is my wife," Kay said, with a studied balance of lightness and indifference in his voice. Neva lifted her hand off his shoulder, settled it again closer to his skin.

"Ah."

"We have known each other all our lives."

"She loves you still."

"How do you know?" he said, surprised. She guided him into a half-turn, so that for a moment he faced his abandoned Gerda, with her sad eyes and downturned mouth, standing in her naive black dress, her champagne tilted and nearly spilling, with only a cadaverous, beaky man trying to get her attention. Neva turned him again; he looked at her, blinking, as if he had been lightly, unexpectedly

struck. She shifted her hand, crooked her fingers around his bare neck.

"She is very beautiful."

"Yes."

"*It is her air of childlike innocence that is so appealing.*"

"And so exasperating," he exclaimed suddenly, as if, like the Apostle, he had been illumined by lightning and stunned with truth.

"Innocence can be," Neva said.

"Gerda knows so little of life. We have lived for years in this city and still she seems so helpless. Scattered. She doesn't know what she wants from life; she wouldn't know how to take it if she did."

"Some women never learn."

"You have. You are so elegant, so sophisticated. So sure." He paused; she saw the word trembling on his lips. She held his gaze, pulled him deeper, deeper into her winter darkness. "But," he breathed, "you must have men telling you this all the time."

"Only if I want them to. And there are not many I choose to listen to."

"You are so beautiful," he said wildly, as if the word had been tormented out of him.

She smiled, slid her other hand up his arm to link her fingers behind his neck. She whispered, "And so are you."

The Thief

Briony watched Gerda walk blindly through the falling snow. It caught on her lashes, melted in the hot, wet tears on her cheeks. Her long coat swung carelessly open to the bitter cold, revealing pearls, gold, a hidden pocket in the lining in which Briony envisioned cash, cards, earrings taken off and forgotten. She gave little thought to Gerda's tears: some party, some man, it was a familiar tale.

She shadowed Gerda, walking silently on the fresh-crushed snow of her footprints, which was futile, she realized, since they were nothing more than a wedge of toe and a rapier stab of stiletto heel. Still, in her tumultuous state of mind, the woman probably would not have noticed a traveling circus behind her.

She slid, shadow-like, to Gerda's side.

"Spare change?"

Gerda glanced at her; her eyes flooded again; she shook her head helplessly. "I have nothing."

Briony's knife snicked open, flashing silver in a rectangle of window light. "You have a triple strand of pearls, a sapphire dinner ring, a gold wedding ring, a pair of earrings either diamond or cubic zirconium, on, I would guess, fourteen karat posts."

"I never got my ears pierced," Gerda said wearily. Briony missed a step, caught up with her.

"Everyone has pierced ears!"

"Diamond, and twenty-two karat gold." She pulled at them, and at her rings. "They were all gifts from Kay. You might as well have them. Take my coat, too." She shrugged it off, let it fall. "That was

also a gift." She tugged the pearls at her throat; they scattered like luminous, tiny moons around her in the snow. "Oh, sorry."

"What are you doing?" Briony breathed. The woman, wearing nothing more than a short and rather silly dress, turned to the icy darkness beyond the window-light. She had actually taken a step into it when Briony caught her arm. She was cold as an iron statue in winter. "Stop!" Briony hauled her coat out of the snow. "Put this back on. You'll freeze!"

"I don't care. Why should you?"

"Nobody is worth freezing for."

"Kay is."

"Is he?" She flung the coat over Gerda's shoulders, pulled it closed.

"God, woman, what Neanderthal age are you from?"

"I love him."

"So?"

"He doesn't love me."

"So?"

"If he doesn't love me, I don't want to live."

Briony stared at her, speechless, having learned from various friends *in extremis* that there was no arguing with such crazed and muddled thinking. Look, she might have said, whirling the woman around to shock her. See that snowdrift beside the wall? Earlier tonight that was an old woman who could have used your coat. Or: Men have notoriously bad taste, why should you let one decide whether you live or die? Piss on him and go find someone else. Or:

Love is an obsolete emotion, ranking in usefulness somewhere between earwigs and toe mold.

She lied instead. She said, "I felt like that once."

She caught a flicker of life in the still, remote eyes. "Did you? Did you want to die?"

"Why don't we go for hot chocolate and I'll tell you about it?"

They sat at the counter of an all-night diner, sipping hot chocolate liberally laced with brandy from Briony's flask. Briony had short, dark, curly hair and sparkling sapphire eyes. She wore lace stockings under several skirts, an antique vest of peacock feathers over a shirt of simulated snakeskin, thigh-high boots, and a dark, hooded cape with many hidden pockets. The waitress behind the counter watched her with a sardonic eye and snapped her gum as she poured Briony's chocolate. Drawn to Gerda's beauty and tragic pallor, she kept refilling Gerda's cup. So did Briony. Briony, improvising wildly, invented a rich, beautiful, upper-class young man whose rejection of her plunged her into despair.

"He loved me," she said, "for the longest night the world has ever known. Then he dumped me like soggy cereal. I was just another pretty face and recycled bod to him. Three days after he offered me marriage, children, cars as big as luxury liners, trips to the family graveyard in Europe, he couldn't even remember my name. Susie, he called me. Hello, Susie, how are you, what can I do for you? I was so miserable I wanted to eat mothballs. I wanted to lie on the sidewalk and sunburn myself to death. The worms wouldn't have touched me, I thought. Not even they could be interested."

"What did you do?" Gerda asked. Briony, reveling in despair, lost her thread of invention. The waitress refilled Gerda's cup.

"I knew a guy like that," the waitress said. "I danced on his car in spiked heels. Then I slashed his tires. Then I found out it wasn't his car."

"What did I do?" Briony said. "What did I do?" She paused dramatically. The waitress had stopped chewing her gum, waiting for an answer. "Well—I mean, of course I did what I had to. What else could I do, but what women like me do when men drop-kick their hearts out of the field. Women like me. Of course women like you are different."

"What did you do?" Gerda asked again. Her eyes were wide and very dark; the brandy had flushed her cheeks. Drops of melted snow glittered like jewels in her disheveled hair. Briony gazed at her, musing.

"With money, you'd think you'd have more choices, wouldn't you? But money or love never taught you how to live. You don't know how to take care of yourself. So if Kay doesn't love you, you have to wander into the snow and freeze. But women like me, and Brenda here—"

"Jennifer," the waitress muttered.

"Jennifer, here, we're so used to fending for ourselves every day that it gets to be a habit. You're not used to fending, so you don't have the habit. So what you have to do is start pretending you have something to live for."

Gerda's eyes filled; a tear dropped into her chocolate. "I haven't."

"Of course you haven't, that's what I've been saying. That's why you have to pretend—"

"Why? It's easier just to walk back out into the snow."

"But if you keep pretending and pretending, one day you'll stumble onto something you care enough to live for, and if you turn yourself into an icicle now because of Kay, you won't be able to change your mind later. The only thing you're seeing in the entire world is Kay. Kay is in both your eyes, Kay is your mind. Which means you're only really seeing one tiny flyspeck of the world, one little puzzle piece. You have to learn to see around Kay. It's like staring at one star all the time and never seeing the moon or planets or constellations—"

"I don't know how to pretend," Gerda said softly. "Kay has always been the sky."

Jennifer swiped her cloth at a crumb, looking thoughtful. "What she says," she pointed out, tossing her head at Briony, "you only have to do it one day at a time. Always just today. That's all any of us do."

Gerda took a swallow of chocolate. Jennifer poured her more; Briony added brandy.

"After all," Briony said, "you could have told me to piss off and mind my own business. But you didn't. You put your coat back on and followed me here. So there must have been something—your next breath, a star you glimpsed—you care enough about."

"That's true," Gerda said, surprised. "But I don't remember what."

"Just keep pretending you remember."

Kay

Kay sat at breakfast with Neva, eating clouds and sunlight. Actually, it was hot biscuits and honey that dripped down his hand. Neva, discoursing on the likelihood of life on other planets, leaned across the table now and then, and slipped her tongue between his fingers to catch the honey. Her face and her white negligee, a lacy tumble of roses, would slide like light past his groping fingers; she would be back in her chair, talking, before he could put his biscuit down.

"The likelihood of life on other planets is very, very great," she said. She had a crumb of Kay's breakfast on her cheek. He reached across the table to brush it away; she caught his forefinger in her mouth and sucked at it until he started to melt off the chair onto his knees. She loosed his finger then and asked, "Have you read Piquelle on the subject?"

"What?"

"Piquelle," she said patiently, "on the subject of life on other planets."

He swallowed. "No."

"Have another biscuit, darling. No, don't move, I'll get it."

"It's no—"

"No, I insist you stay where you are. Don't move." She took his plate and stood up. He could see the outline of her pale, slender body under the lace. "Did you say something, Kay?"

"I groaned."

"There are billions of galaxies. And in each galaxy, billions of stars, each of which might well have its courtiers orbiting it." She reached into the dainty cloth in which the biscuits were wrapped. Through the window above the sideboard, snow fell endlessly; her hothouse daffodils shone like artificial light among the bone china, the crystal butter dish, the honey pot, the napkins patterned with an exotic flock of startled birds trying to escape beyond the hems. Kay caught a fold of her negligee between his teeth as she put his biscuit down. She laughed indulgently, pushed against his face and let him trace the circle of her navel through the lace with his tongue. Then she glided out of reach, sat back in her chair.

"Think of it!"

"I am."

"Billions of stars, billions of galaxies! And life around each star, eating, conversing, dreaming, perhaps indulging in startling alien sexual practices—Allow me, darling." She thrust her finger deep into the honey, brought it out trailing a fine strand of gold that beaded into drops on the dark wood. As her finger rolled across his broken biscuit, she bent her head, licked delicately at the trail of honey on the table. Kay, trying to catch her finger in his mouth, knocked over his coffee. It splashed onto her hand.

"Oh, my darling," he exclaimed, horrified. "Did I burn you? Let me see!"

"It's nothing," she said coolly, retrieving her hand and wiping it on her napkin. "I do not burn easily. Where were we?"

"Your finger was in my biscuit," he said huskily.

"The point he makes, of course, is that with so many potential suns and an incredibly vast number of systems perhaps orbiting them, the chances are not remote for life—perhaps sophisticated, intelligent, technologically advanced—life, in essence, as we know it, circling one of those distant stars. Imagine!" she exclaimed, rapt, absently pulling apart a daffodil and dropping pieces of its golden horn down her negligee. The petal pieces seemed to Kay to burn here and there on her body beneath a frail web of white. "On some planet circling some distant, unnamed star, Kay and Neva are seated in a snowbound city, breakfasting and discussing the possibility of life on other planets. Is that not strange and marvelous?"

He cleared his throat. "Do you think you might like me to remove some of those petals for you?"

"What petals?"

"The one, perhaps, caught between your breasts."

She smiled. "Of course, my darling." As he leaped precipitously to his feet, scattering silverware, she added, "Oh, darling, hand me the newspaper."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I always do the crossword puzzle after breakfast. Don't you? I like to time myself. Eighteen minutes and thirty-two seconds was my fastest. What was yours?"

She pulled the paper out of his limp hand, and watched, smiling faintly, as he flung himself groaning in despair across the table. His face lay in her biscuit crumbs; the spilled honey began to undulate

slowly out of its pot toward his mouth; coffee spread darkly across the wood from beneath his belly. Neva leaned over his prone body, delicately sipped coffee. Then she opened her mouth against his ear and breathed a hot, moist sigh throughout his bones.

"You have broken my coffee pot," she murmured. "You must kneel at my feet while I work this puzzle. You will speculate, as I work, on the strange and wonderful sexual practices of aliens on various planets."

He slid off the table onto his knees in front of her. She propped the folded paper on his head. "Nine fifty-seven and fourteen seconds exactly. Begin, my darling."

"On the planet Debula, where people communicate not by voice but by a complex written arrangement whereby words are linked in seemingly arbitrary fashion by a similar letter in each word, and whose lawyers make vast sums of money interpreting and arguing over the meanings of the linked words, the men, being quite short, are fixated peculiarly on kneecaps. When faced with a pair, they are seized with indescribable longing and behave in frenzied fashion, first uncovering them and gazing raptly at them, then consuming whatever daffodil petal happens to be adhering to them, then moistening them all over in hope of eventually coaxing them apart..."

"What is a four letter synonym for the title of a novel by the Russian author Dostoyevsky?"

"Idiot," he sighed against her knees.

"Ah. Fool. Thank you, my darling. Forgive me if I am somewhat

inattentive, but your voice, like the falling snow, is wonderfully calming. I could listen to it all day. I know that, as you roam from planet to planet, you will come across some strange practice that will be irresistible to me, and I will begin to listen to you." She crossed her legs abruptly, banging his nose with her knee. "Please continue with your tale, my darling. You may be as leisurely and detailed as you like. We have all winter."

Gerda

Gerda heaved a fifty-pound sack of potting soil off the stack beside the greenhouse door and dropped it on her workbench. She slit it open with the sharp end of a trowel and began to scoop soil into three-inch pots sitting on a tray. The phone rang in the shop; she heard Briony say,

"Four dozen roses? Two dozen each of Peach Belle and Firebird, billed to Selene Pray? You would like them delivered this afternoon?"

Gerda began dropping pansy seeds into the pots. Beyond the tinted greenhouse walls it was still snowing: a long winter, they said, the longest on record. Gerda's greenhouse—half a dozen long glass rooms, each temperature controlled for varied environments, lying side by side and connected by glass archways—stood on the roof of one of the highest buildings in the city. Gerda could see across the ghostly white city to the frozen ports where great freighters were locked in the ice. She had sold nearly all of her jewelry to have the

nursery built and stocked in such a merciless season, but, once open, her business was brisk. People yearned for color and perfume, for there seemed no color in the world but white and no scent but the pure, blanched, icy air. It was rumored that the climatic change had begun, and the glaciers were beginning to move down from the north. Eventually, they would be seen pushing blindly through the streets, encasing the city in a cocoon of solid ice for a millennium or two. Some people, in anticipation of the future, were making arrangements to have themselves frozen. Others simply ordered flowers to replicate the truant season.

"I'm taking a delivery," Briony said in the doorway. "Jennifer isn't back yet from hers." She had cut her hair and dyed it white. It sprang wildly from her head in petals of various lengths, reminding Gerda of a chrysanthemum. Jennifer loved driving the truck and delivering flowers, but Briony pined in captivity. She compensated for it by wearing rich antique velvets and tapestries and collecting different kinds of switchblades. Gerda had persuaded her to work until spring; by then, she thought, Briony might be coaxed through another season. Meanwhile, spring dallied; Briony drooped.

"All right," Gerda said. "I'll listen for the phone. Look, Briony, the lavender seedlings are coming up."

"Of course they're coming up," Briony said. "Everything you touch grows. If you dropped violets from the rooftop, they would take root in the snow. If you planted a shoe, it would grow into a shoe-tree."

"I want you to sell something for me."

Briony brightened. She kept her old business acquaintances by means of Gerda's jewels, reassuring them that she had only

temporarily abandoned crime to help a friend.

"What?"

"A sapphire necklace. I want more stock; I want to grow orchids. Stop by the flat. The necklace is in the safe beneath the still life. Do you know anyone who sells paintings?"

"I'll find someone."

"Good," she said briskly, but she avoided Briony's sharp eyes, for the dismantling of her great love was confined, as yet, only to odds and ends of property. The structure itself was inviolate. She turned away, began to water seedlings. The front bell jangled. She said, "I'll see to it. You wrap the roses."

The man entering the shop made her heart stop. It was Kay. It was not Kay. It might have been Kay once: tall, fair, with the same sweet smile, the same extravagance of spirit.

"I want," he said, "every flower in the shop."

Gerda touched hair out of her eyes, leaving a streak of potting soil on her brow. She smiled suddenly, at a memory, and the stranger's eyes, vague with his own thoughts, saw beneath the potting soil and widened.

"I know," Gerda said. "You are in love."

"I thought I was," he said confusedly.

"You want all the flowers in the world."

"Yes."

He was oddly silent, then; Gerda asked, "Do you want me to help you choose which?"

"I have just chosen." He stepped forward. His eyes were lighter than Kay's, a warm gold-brown. He laughed at himself, still gazing at her. "*I* mean yes. Of course. You choose. I want to take a woman to dinner tonight, and I want to give her the most beautiful flower in the world and ask her to marry me. What is your favorite flower?"

"Perhaps," Gerda suggested, "you might start with her favorite color, if you are unsure of her favorite flower."

"Well. Right now it appears to be denim."

"Denim. Blue?"

"It's hardly passionate, is it? Neither is the color of potting soil."

"*I* beg-"

"Gold. The occasion begs for gold."

"Yellow roses?"

"Do you like roses?"

"Of course."

"But yellow for a proposal?"

"Perhaps a winey red. Or a brilliant streaked orange."

"But what is your favorite flower?"

"Fuchsias," Gerda said, smiling. "You can hardly present her with a potted plant."

"And your favorite color?"

"Black."

"Then," he said, "I want a black fuchsia."

Gerda was silent. The stranger stepped close to her, touched her

hand. She was on the other side of the counter suddenly, hearing herself babble.

"I carry no black fuchsias. I'm a married woman, I have a husband —"

"Where is your wedding ring?"

"At home. Under my pillow. I sleep with it."

"Instead of your husband?" he said, so shrewdly her breath caught. He smiled. "Have dinner with me."

"But you love someone else!"

"I stopped, the moment I saw you. I had a fever, the fever passed. Your eyes are so clear, like a spring day. Your lips. There must be a rose the color of your lips. Take me and your lips to the roses, let me match them."

"I can't," she said breathlessly. "I love my husband."

"Loving one's spouse is quite old-fashioned. When was the last time he brought you a rose? Or touched your hand, like this? Or your lips. Like. This." He drew back, looked into her eyes again. "What is your name?"

She swallowed. "Why do you look so much like Kay? It's unfair."

"But I'm so much nicer."

"Are you?"

"Much," he said, and slid his hand around her head to spring the clip on the pin that held her hair so that it tumbled down around her face. He drew her close, repeated the word against her lips. "Much."

"Much," she breathed, and they passed the word back and forth a

little.

"I'm off," Briony said, coming through the shop with her arms full of roses. Gerda, jumping, caught a glimpse of her blue, merry eyes before the door slammed. She gathered her hair in her hands, clipped it back.

"No. No, no, no. I'm married to Kay."

"I'll come for you at eight."

"No."

"Oh, and may I take you to a party after dinner?"

"No."

"You might as well get used to me."

"No."

He kissed her. "At eight, then." At the door, he turned. "By the way, do you have a name?"

"No."

"I thought not. My name is Foxx. Two x's. I'll pick you up here, since I'm sure you don't have a home, either." He blew her a kiss.

"Au revoir, my last love."

"I won't be here."

"Of course not. Do you like sapphires?"

"I hate them."

"I thought so. They'll have to do until you are free to receive diamonds for your wedding."

"I am married to Kay."

"Sapphires, fuchsias, and denim. You see how much I know about you already. Chocolate?"

"No!"

"Champagne?"

"Go away!"

He smiled his light, brilliant smile. "After tonight, Kay will be only a dream, the way winter snow is a pale dream in spring. Tomorrow, the glaciers will recede, and the hard buds will appear on the trees. Tomorrow, we will smell the earth again, and the roiling, briny sea will crack the ice and the great ships will set sail to foreign countries and so shall you and I, my last love, set sail to distant and marvelous ports of call whose names we will never quite be able to pronounce, though we will remember them vividly all of our lives."

"No," she whispered.

"At eight. I shall bring you a black fuchsia."

Spring

"Dear Gerda," Selene said. "Darling Foxx. How wonderful of you to come to my party. How original you look, Gerda. You must help me plan my great swan song, the final definitive party ending all seasons. As the ice closes around us and traps us for history like butterflies in amber, the violinists will be lifting their bows, the guests swirling in the arms of their lovers, rebuffed spouses lifting their champagne glasses—it will be a splendid moment in time

sealed and unchanged until the anthropologists come and chip us out of the ice. Do you suppose their excavations will be accompanied by the faint pop of champagne bubbles escaping the ice? Ah! There is Pilar O'Malley with her ninth husband. Darling Pilar is looking tired. It must be so exhausting hunting fortunes."

"Tomorrow," said Foxx.

"No," said Gerda. She was wearing her short black dress in hope that Foxx would be discouraged by its primness. Her only jewels were a pair of large blue very faux pearls that Briony had pinched from Woolworth's.

"You came with me tonight. You will come with me tomorrow. You will flee this frozen city, your flower pots, your patched denim—" He guided her toward the champagne, which poured like a waterfall through a cascade of Gerda's roses. "And your defunct marriage, which has about as much life to it as a house empty of everything but memory." He had been speaking so all evening, through champagne and quail, chocolates and port, endlessly patient, endlessly assured. The black silk fuchsia, a sapphire ring, a pair of satin heels, gloves with diamond cuffs were scattered in the back of his sleigh. Gerda, wearied and confused with too many words, too much champagne, felt as if the world were growing unfamiliar around her. There was no winter in Foxx's words, no Kay, no flower shop. The world was becoming a place of exotic, sunlit ports where she must go as a stranger, and as another stranger's wife. What of Briony, whom she had coaxed out of the streets? What of her lavender seedlings? Who would water her pansies? Who would order potting soil? She saw herself suddenly standing among

Selene's rich, glittering guests and worrying about potting soil. She laughed. The world and winter returned; the inventions of the insubstantial stranger Foxx turned into dreams and air, and she laughed *again*, knowing that the potting soil would be there tomorrow and the ports would not.

Across the room, Kay saw her laugh.

For a moment he did not recognize her: he had never seen her laugh like that. Then he thought, Gerda. The man beside her had taught her how to laugh.

"My darling," Neva said to him. "Will you get me champagne?" She did not wait for him to reply, but turned her back to him and continued her discussion with a beautiful and eager young man about the eternal truths in alchemy. Kay had no energy even for a disillusioned smile; he might have been made of ice for all the expression his face held. His heart, he felt, had withered into something so tiny that when the anthropologists came to excavate Selene's final party, his shrunken heart would be held a miracle of science, perhaps a foreshadowing of the physical advancement of future *homo*.

He stood beside Gerda to fill the champagne glasses, but he did not look at her or greet her. Not even she could reach him, as far as he had gone into the cold, empty wastes of winter's heart. Gerda, feeling a chill brush her, as of a ghost's presence, turned. For a moment, she did not recognize Kay. She saw only a man grown so pale and weary she thought he must have lost the one thing in the world he had ever loved.

Then she knew what he had lost. She whispered, "Kay."

He looked at her. Her eyes were the color of the summer skies none of them would see again: blue and full of light. He said, "Hello, Gerda. You look well."

"You look so sad." She put her hand to her breast, a gesture he remembered. "You aren't happy."

He shrugged slightly. "We make our lives." His champagne glasses were full, but he lingered a moment in the warmth of her eyes. "You look happy. You look beautiful. Do I know that dress? Is it new?"

She smiled. "No." Foxx was beside her suddenly, his hand on her elbow.

"Gerda?"

"It's old," Gerda said, holding Kay's eyes. "I no longer have much use for such clothes. I sold all the jewels you gave me to open a nursery. I grew all the roses you see here, and those tulips and the peonies."

"A nursery? In midwinter? What a brilliant and challenging idea. That explains the dirt under your thumbnail."

"Kay, my darling," said Neva's deep, languid voice behind them, "you forgot my champagne. Ah. It is little Gerda in her sweet frock."

"Yes," Kay said. "She has grown beautiful."

"Have I?"

"Gerda and I," Foxx said, "are leaving the city tomorrow. Perhaps that explains her unusual beauty."

"You are going away with Foxx?" Kay said, recognizing him.

"What a peculiar thing to do. You'll fare better with your peonies."

"Congratulations, my sweets, I'm sure you'll both be so happy. Kay, there is someone I want you to—"

"Why are you going with Foxx?" Kay persisted. "He scatters hearts behind him like other people scatter bad checks."

"Don't be bitter, Kay," Foxx said genially. "We all find our last loves, as you have. Gerda, there is someone—"

"Tomorrow," Gerda said calmly, "I am going to make nine arrangements: two funerals, a birthday, three weddings, two hospital and one anniversary. I am also going to find an orchid supplier and do the monthly accounts."

"You're not going with Foxx."

"Of course she is," Foxx said. Gerda took her eyes briefly from Kay to look at him.

"I prefer my plants," she said simply.

An odd sound cut through the noise of the party, as if in the distance something immense had groaned and cracked in two. Kay turned suddenly, pushed the champagne glasses into Neva's hands.

"May I come—" His voice trembled so badly he stopped, began again. "May I come to your shop tomorrow and buy a flower?"

She worked a strand of hair loose from behind her ear and twirled it around one finger, another gesture he remembered. "Perhaps," she said coolly. He saw the tears in her eyes, like the sheen on melting, sunlit ice. He did not know if they were tears of love or pain; perhaps, he thought, he might never know, for she had walked through light and shadow while he had encased himself in ice.

"What flower?"

"I read once there is a language of flowers. Given by people to one another, they turn into words like love, anger, forgiveness. I will have to study the language to know what flower I need to ask for."

"Perhaps," she said tremulously, "you should try looking someplace other than language for what you want."

He was silent, looking into her eyes. The icy air outside cracked again, a lightning-whip of sound that split through the entire city. Around them, people held one another and laughed, even those perhaps somewhat disappointed that life had lost the imminence of danger, and that the world would continue its ancient, predictable ways. Neva handed the mute and grumpy Foxx one of the champagne glasses she held. She drained the other and, smiling her faint, private smile, passed on in search of colder climes.