

The Queen of Frost and Darkness

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“It is a pity that your birthday falls in midwinter,” said the Countess Anna Feodorovna Godunov as she pinned the last of the hothouse gardenias into the intricate curls of her daughter’s honey-colored hair. “Still, I believe there will be a most respectable turnout.”

“If you think so, mamma,” Galina Andreevna replied demurely. Truth be told, if no one but Karel showed up, she would still count the evening a success. It seemed silly to be going to all this fuss to launch her into society, when everyone knew that the young Baron Karel Ivanovich Saburov and the daughter of Count Andrei Mikhailovich Godunov were as good as engaged. But she supposed the forms must be followed.

At least there had been a break in the harsh January weather, and three nights in a row where the sky was so clear the stars sparkled like the diamonds in the parure her mother wore to only the most formal occasions. They sparkled now at the Countess Anna’s throat and ears and in the careful coils of her graying fair hair, which was discreetly supplemented by a good number of switches and false braids in order to achieve the required effect.

Galina had no need of such artifice; her own luxuriant tresses reached nearly to her waist. Indeed, her hair felt quite heavy pinned up as it was now, with carefully arranged curls falling about her shoulders and a tiara of pearls and

diamonds tucked into the tall braided mass at the crown of her head. She thought she looked quite grown-up now, what with the hair and the evening gown that showed off her shoulders and just the slightest curve of her breasts. Yes, she and Karel had known each other since they were children, and were so intimate that they often could finish one another’s sentences, but he had never quite seen her like this. Perhaps he would be moved by her new elegance to make an offer for her; after all, she was eighteen now, and it was time to leave the schoolroom behind. Such an offer would be a fitting cap to the grand evening her parents had planned, and she thought they would be very glad of it.

Her mother made the minutest adjustment to Galina’s tiara, then said, “It is time. We must be ready to receive our guests, and it is almost eight.”

The countess swept Galina out of her rooms and down the wide marble staircase with its carved gilded balustrades, on past the foyer and into the grand salon. Despite the wintry weather outside, the room bloomed with more hothouse flowers—orchids and lilies and more gardenias, their perfume combining to quite make Galina’s head swim. She did shake it, just a little. Any more, and she risked dislodging her tiara.

She took the designated position between her father and her mother and waited for the

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first guests to arrive. With any luck, Karel would be one of the early comers. He did tend to be somewhat punctual—as long as he wasn't delayed for some reason at his club. She often wondered what could go on in such places to make them so endlessly fascinating to men, but when she'd tried to ask her mother to enlighten her on the subject, she'd only gotten a curt reply that properly brought up young ladies shouldn't be troubling themselves with such things.

But here was Karel, looking very fine as he took off his evening cloak and handed it to Gregor, the butler. Blue eyes dancing—and in such striking contrast to his coal-black hair—Karel bowed to her and her parents, then said, “Everything is quite en fête, is it not? Tell me I am not the first here, though.”

“You are,” the countess told him. “But you should not trouble yourself, Karel Ivanovich. Your promptness does you credit.”

“And now you have saved everyone else from the shame of being the first to arrive,” Galina put in, “which makes you quite the hero of the evening.”

Both her mother and father shot stern looks in her direction for this piece of impertinence, but Karel only smiled and said, “Then as I am first to arrive, may I also claim the honor of the first dance?”

Of course Galina smiled and nodded, and her parents appeared relieved that he had taken no offense. Then the Count and Countess Stroganov appeared, followed by the Galitsyns, and the evening was off and running.

As it turned out, Karel claimed not only the grand march that opened the dancing, but also a waltz, and then the mazurka. Galina knew she should not monopolize her old friend for the evening, but really, he danced so beautifully, and looked so dashing in his tailcoat with the white rose fastened to his lapel that she found it difficult to turn him down. And very likely they

would be engaged by the end of the evening, or soon after, so what difference did one tiny bit of impropriety make? Certainly none of her other prospects for dance partners were half as appealing.

The mazurka had just ended, and Karel had departed to fetch her a glass of champagne, when a sudden hush fell over the company. Heads turned toward the entrance of the ballroom, and Galina peered past the assembled guests to see what could have drawn their attention so.

A woman stood in the entryway, framed by matched floral arrangements of white trailing orchids and elegant lilies. But she made the flowers appear as if wilted and yellow, so brilliant was her beauty. Her snow-fair hair was topped by an icy coronet of sparkling diamonds, and her flawless skin was equally as pale. She wore white worked in silver — something that should have been an egregious faux pas, as only the guest of honor should wear white at her début, but something in the woman's air seemed to say that she couldn't possibly be seen in any color but white.

With one elegant hand she reached out, and at once one of the servants hurried over to place a champagne flute in those long, kid-encased fingers. She smiled; her teeth were as white as her skin and hair.

“Who is that?” Galina whispered to her friend Ekaterina Borisovna. “Have you ever seen her before, Katya?”

“It's the Princess Tatiana Vasilevna Zakharin,” Katya replied, looking flummoxed. “She has lived in Moscow for some time, but I heard Papa say something about her buying an estate not too far from St. Petersburg.”

Galina couldn't quite understand why such a personage was attending her small coming-out party—but there was her father, forging forward and bowing over the unexpected arrival's

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hand. And if the Count Andrei Mikhailovich Godunov appeared rather red-faced and common next to the princess' lily-fair beauty, at least he had broken the tension somewhat by welcoming her to the party.

The crowd began to flow normally again, and Galina realized she had quite lost sight of Karel. Then she heard a throaty laugh, and looked over to see her friend amongst a crowd of other young men, all of whom had clustered around Tatiana Vasilievna like little bits of iron drawn to a magnet. Karel stared down into the strange woman's face with an intensity Galina quite disliked.

A tinkle of broken glass, as Princess Tatiana's glass of champagne slipped from her gloved fingers and crashed to the marble floor. She cried, "Oh, how clumsy of me!"

Karel winced, and blinked, and Galina watched as he raised one white-gloved hand to touch the corner of his left eye, as if something there had pained him. But then he smiled and extended the glass of champagne he held—the champagne which was supposed to have been Galina's—and said, "Accept this, Princess. And do not call yourself clumsy, for of course that is an impossibility."

Princess Tatiana smiled and accepted the glass, and Galina bit her lip and forced herself to look away. If Karel wanted to make a fool of himself over the woman, there was very little she could do about it. And really, the Princess must be quite a bit older than he, for all her beauty, and so he would look doubly a fool after she passed him by and bestowed her attentions on someone more equal in age and rank.

Still, seeing him smiling foolishly at the other woman made the blood in Galina's veins run just a little hotter, and she murmured an excuse to Katya and went over to Karel, who hovered a few inches from Tatiana Vasilievna's elbow.

"Karel, hadn't you promised me the next waltz?" she inquired, in tones she hoped were sweetly beseeching. It wouldn't do to look desperate, of course, even though she wished she could take him by the elbow and haul him bodily away from the icy beauty's orbit.

He turned and stared down at her blankly, as if he had never seen her before. Then his eyes narrowed a bit, and he replied, "I think you have danced enough, Galya. Your forehead is shiny, and your nose quite red."

Galina raised a hand to her brow before she could stop herself. True, she had been dancing a good deal, and perhaps she had acquired a bit of a "glow," as her mother would have put it. But it was quite unacceptable for Karel to be mentioning such things. A gentleman never brought up a lady's shortcomings, whether real or imagined. As for her nose—

"And if we dance some more, I suppose I will get shinier and redder," she retorted. "I never noticed that such things bothered you before, Karel Ivanovich."

"Well, they do now," he said carelessly, and turned half away from her, his gaze resting on the Princess, perfect and pale between the clustering men who surrounded her. "I don't wish to dance."

The words "with you" remained unsaid, but they hung in the air between them. Hot tears started to Galina's eyes, but she blinked them away and raised her chin. She would not let him see how much he had upset her.

"Very well," she replied. "Anatoly Andreovich has been pestering me all night for a dance; I shall give him yours." And with that she flounced off in search of a surprised but very gratified Anatoly. That individual, although never someone Galina could take seriously as a suitor due to a deficiency in height and an even more deficient fortune, rose higher in her esteem because he at least seemed to have

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escaped the spell of Princess Tatiana. Or perhaps he had simply decided that if he could have no success with someone such as Galina Andreevna Godunov, then the Princess was as far out of his reach as the stars in the sky.

Whatever the case, Galina did not lack for partners for the rest of the night, although she did not have the only one she wanted. From the corner of her eye she watched him dance with the Princess, or bring her champagne and caviar, or stand in a corner and chat with her much more intimately than their short acquaintance should have allowed, and through it all Galya felt a tightening in her stomach that had very little to do with the close-fitting rows of whalebone that encircled her slender waist. When the soirée finally ended in the small hours of the morning, she could only think of how differently she had thought the evening would turn out. She had thought Karel would finally speak, that she would have ascended these stairs with the touch of his first kiss thrilling her lips. Instead, she sat, mute, as her maid Oksana undid the laces on her gown and then on her corset and helped her into her nightdress and brushed out the heavy masses of her hair before braiding it for the night.

Galina said nothing through all these ministrations; she feared that if she opened her mouth to speak, a sob would escape instead. So she sat, tight-lipped, and avoided Oksana's questioning eyes, until she could finally go to bed and put the dreadful day behind her.

The next morning—or rather, the next afternoon, as Galina did not rise from her bed until the morning was quite spent—Oksana was unable to hold her tongue any longer, and informed Galina that apparently Karel Ivanovich had had the most dreadful quarrel with his mother, and had gone riding off late that morning to goodness knows where and hadn't come back. The

Dowager Baroness had not attended Galina's coming-out party, as the older woman suffered from a degenerative condition that had left her quite unable to walk, but her condition apparently had not prevented her from learning everything there was to be learned, including how dreadfully he had treated Galina Andreevna and how he had fawned over Princess Tatiana, who was a horrid woman who broke hearts right and left in Moscow and had apparently only moved on to St. Petersburg because she desired fresh sport.

Even the news that Baroness Natasha Alexandrovna Saburov supported Galina and not her son did little to lift Galya's spirits, as, after all, it mattered very little what the Baroness said or thought; it was not she who would ask for Galina's hand, but her son. And with the Princess now on the scene, it seemed as if that day would never come.

"What's more," Oksana said in confiding tones, as she cleared away Galina's supper tray, "I've heard it said that the Princess is not a real woman at all, but a sorceress who's sold her soul for beauty and wealth. So no wonder she bewitched all those poor young men."

Galina wished it were that easy. Better to blame Karel's defection on diabolical intervention than on the simple sordid fact that he preferred another woman to her. She had no doubt that he had gone to the Princess, or at least somewhere near her property. Perhaps they had eloped. He had seemed besotted enough to do something that foolish.

At this dreary thought, the tears finally did come, dropping down her cheeks and falling onto the patterned silk of her quilted dressing gown. She had told her parents she was overtired and quite indisposed, using that as an excuse to stay in her rooms. No doubt they had guessed the real reason for her hiding herself away, but as they tended to be indulgent, they

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had not asked any questions or demanded that she join them for supper.

“Oh, my poor lamb,” said Oksana, who produced a handkerchief and proceeded to blot the tears from Galina’s cheeks. “It’s no small thing, to have a witch steal your young man away from you.”

“He’s not my young man,” Galina replied. She took the handkerchief away from Oksana and wiped her eyes, then balled up the piece of linen in her lap. “And if he thinks the Princess is so fascinating, he can have her.”

“What he thinks can’t be trusted. One only had to look at him to see that he was bewitched.”

“And how would you know that? You weren’t at the ball.”

Oksana’s full cheeks flushed a little. “As to that, I was watching from the landing upstairs. I saw him leave — with her. And shouldn’t I know that young man’s expressions almost as well as I know yours, seeing as he’s been almost a part of the family for both your lives?”

Galina, who had hidden herself away in the smaller salon with Katya and a few other sympathetic friends, had not known that Karel had escorted Tatiana Vasilievna from the party. Once again she felt her stomach clench. Perhaps Oksana was right. After all, what other explanation could there be for Karel’s odd behavior, save that a witch had someone cast a spell over him?

“And what if he is bewitched?” she demanded. “What on earth do you propose I do about it?”

“Why, you go get him, and fetch him back. Black magic can’t prevail against true love. And he loves you. Everyone knows that.”

Everyone except Karel, apparently. But Galina had felt sure of that love up until last night, and so had her family and friends. It had to be a spell, some dark magic that had erased the pure love she and Karel shared. If only she could see him, be alone with him, she might be able to remind him of how their spirits had always seemed to be

one, even if the connection between them had not yet been sanctified by the church.

“And how am I to go, when you know I never leave the house alone?” Even as she asked the question some small part of her quailed. For it was one thing to be brave in her own rooms, in the company of the maid who had known her since she was an infant, and quite another to go out into the wide world and confront a witch.

“As to that, we shall go out together, saying you are calling on your friend Ekaterina Borisovna. No one will think anything odd in such a visit; indeed, your parents would think it only natural that you would seek the comfort of a friend after suffering such a shock as you did last night.”

So it was settled, and Galina allowed Oksana to help her into her best walking-out suit, the cinnamon wool one that went so well with her honey hair and brown eyes. The Princess’ eyes, she recalled, had been a glinting pale grey, almost silver. Quite otherworldly, as one might expect from a witch and a consort of the Devil.

The weather still held fine, although a line of dark clouds to the northeast seemed to signal that the odd extended clear spell would soon be over. Oksana had Gregor call a hired carriage for Galina; luckily, the Countess was also visiting that afternoon, and so no one saw anything untoward in the daughter of the house and her maidservant setting forth in a hired hack.

They drove to the edge of town, for the intelligence Oksana had gleaned indicated that the Princess’ estate lay some miles to the south of the city. Where exactly, no one seemed to know, but Galina supposed it was better to have a direction than nothing at all.

The driver would take them no farther than the outskirts of the city. Oksana began to scold him, but Galina laid a hand on her arm. “We cannot ask the man to drive all over the countryside. He has shortened my journey, at least.”

“Our journey, you mean.”

Galina shook her head. A feeling had been growing all during the ride here, the knowledge that she must go to seek Karel alone. Knights errant did not go on their quests accompanied by maidservants, after all. “No, Oksana. You must stay here, and let my parents know what I have done if—” She hesitated; while she somehow knew what she must do, still that didn’t keep her from being afraid. In all her life she had never been alone, and now she proposed to set forth by herself, into the dark and the storm. It was madness, but as surely as she had known Karel loved her, she knew she could only save him if she did so alone.

“But miss—”

“My mind is quite made up, Oksana.” Galina spoke firmly, and pressed Oksana’s hands. “Take the carriage back to the house, and try not to be seen. The longer my parents don’t know I am gone, the better. And don’t you dare let them blame you, whatever they might say. You must tell them that I ordered you back home.”

Apparently Oksana didn’t quite know what to do with such a suddenly masterful and commanding mistress, for she hesitated, and wrung her hands, then said, “If you think that is how it must be—”

“I do. Now go, for the driver is becoming impatient.”

So he was; he shifted from foot to foot and scowled at the two of them, and cast a jaundiced eye at the lowering skies overhead. Galina fished a coin from her reticule and pressed it into the driver’s hands. He pocketed it at once and climbed up onto his seat without giving either her or Oksana a second look. It seemed quite clear that he was ready to drive off without either one of them if they tarried much longer.

So she opened the door to the carriage. Oksana paused, then gave her charge one final

glance before heaving a resigned sigh as she climbed into the passenger compartment. “How I will ever explain this—”

“Don’t bother,” Galina replied. “I’ll explain it all myself, when I come home.”

And with that she shut the door and turned away from the carriage, facing into the bitter wind. True, she wore her new mink-lined cape and its matching hat and muff, and even her hands inside the muff were covered in warm fur-lined gloves, but even all that did not seem much of an armor against that biting blast from the east. However, she had decided her course, and she would follow it, no matter what happened.

At least since it had not snowed recently, the road was easy enough to navigate. From time to time a carriage or wagon would rattle by, more often than not with its occupants giving her increasingly puzzled stares, but Galina kept on, following the route as it wound away to the south and east.

She tried to tell herself that it was not so very cold, not really, but after awhile she only put one foot in front of the other because she knew that was what she had to do, not because she could really feel those feet anymore. The light began to fade, and then the first snowflakes gently started to fall—one by one at first, and then in flurries, and finally in billows of white. By that time Galina had given up any pretense of following the road, or even of knowing in what direction she was headed. She only blundered forward, hands clenched inside her muff, her entire being focused on Karel. The thought of him would be enough to keep her alive.

So intense was the storm, and so complete the darkness, that she was shocked to hear a female voice cry out suddenly, “Hold!”

Galina stopped, and saw the flare of a torch bobbing through the white-shot darkness. Her heart began to pound. Had the icy princess discovered her quest?

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The voice had sounded far rougher than the sweetly chill voice of Tatiana Vasilievna, however, and the personage who revealed herself now was obviously no princess. Rough furs muffled her form so that one could barely discern her sex, and the tip of the nose that protruded between the fur hat she wore pulled low on her brow and the muffler that covered most of her chin had a distinct spot of soot on it.

“Who goes there?” demanded this apparition. She held her torch up high and gazed into Galina’s face. The strange woman—or girl, as something in her shape seemed to suggest that she was not much older than Galya, if that—cocked her head to one side and said, “Are you mad?”

“No,” Galina answered, although she wondered even as she made the denial if perhaps she had gone mad, to push on into the heart of the storm after a man who perhaps did not love her as she thought he did.

“Hmm,” said the rough young woman. “I think you must be mad to be out in this.”

“You are out in it as well, aren’t you?”

The stranger appeared to consider. “True... but I was on my way home, and I know that you live nowhere around here.”

“No, I don’t,” Galina admitted. “I’m seeking the palace of the Princess Tatiana Vasilievna Zakharin.”

“The Queen of Frost and Darkness?”

Somehow Galina knew that this Queen and the Princess must be the same person. For how else could one describe a woman of such outward icy beauty, yet with such a black heart beating within her perfect breast?

She nodded, and the young woman said, “And I believe I know why. Only this morning a fine young man went riding to the Princess’ estate and never came back. Someone you know, I presume?”

Galina nodded, but found herself quite

unable to reply, for her teeth had begun to chatter so violently that she could not get a word out. The stranger cocked her head and said, “I know the way. But we cannot stay out in this—let me take you to my home, and we shall see if the morning gives us better weather.”

To this suggestion Galya could only nod, and she bent her head in thanks. The young woman took her by the arm and led her off away into the swirling snow. How she could possibly find her way in this, Galina did not know, but after what felt like an eternity but was most likely less than a quarter-hour, they blundered out of the storm and into a cave opening half hidden by a stand of dark pines.

Inside were a score or more of men, ruffians and robbers by the look of them, and Galya shrank back against her guide, quite certain she had been led astray on purpose. But the young woman called out, “I am here with a friend. You would do well to look elsewhere!”

And the men turned away, and Galina found herself led to a smaller chamber outfitted with quite a warm bed piled high with furs, and a brazier that served to take some of the chill from the air.

“You—you are very kind,” she stammered, and the strange young woman only smiled and replied,

“As to that, I expect payment for my assistance. That muff you carry is quite fine; I think that should do nicely.”

Something in her quailed at the thought of giving up the muff, which had protected her hands so well, but perhaps the storm would have blown itself out by morning, and she would no longer need it quite so badly. Besides, what was a muff, compared to shelter and the prospect of finding Karel on the morrow?

“Of course,” she said, “but I will give it to you only after you have brought me to Tatiana Vasilievna’s palace.”

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“Well enough,” replied the young woman with a grin. “It’s good that you have some spirit. You will need it.”

And with that she settled herself into her bed, and gestured for Galina to join her. They slept, safe and warm in the heart of the robbers’ stronghold.

The next morning they set out for the Princess’ palace, which Sasha the robber girl claimed lay only a few miles off. The storm had moved on, and the countryside was blanketed in white, dazzling under a pale morning sun. Galya squinted against the glare as best she could and trudged along after her unlikely companion. An hour or so later they reached a border of dark hedges half-buried under the snow, which Sasha said marked the border of Tatiana Vasilievna’s property.

“And here is the gate,” the robber girl said, and produced a rather fine set of lock picks from her belt. Within a moment she had dispatched the heavy padlock which held the gate shut.

“You are very clever,” Galina said quite honestly. It seemed quite a fine skill to have, and she smiled as she pulled the muff from her hands and gave it to Sasha. “You have earned this, and more.”

“That I have. But I shan’t leave you here—let me take you to the back door.”

How Sasha had gained this knowledge, Galina didn’t know and felt sure she couldn’t ask. But she followed the other girl around the outskirts of the house, which took some time, as it truly was a palace, and not just a fine country house such as the dacha Galina’s family stayed in every summer. There seemed to be no one about, not even a footman or a scullery maid. As they approached the rear door, which was covered by a small portico, an odd little flurry of snow rose up from the ground and surrounded the two girls. For a few seconds Galya felt as if

she might be blinded by the driving flakes, but she murmured the words of the Lord’s Prayer under her breath, and asked the Holy Father to protect her and Sasha. As quickly as it had risen up, the snow fell to the ground.

Sasha stared at her with wide, dark eyes. “I thought you were mad,” she said, “but perhaps you are only touched by God.”

Was it God’s hand that had guided her so far, that had brought her here so far unharmed? Galina thought that more likely than simple blind luck, but she merely lifted her shoulders. “I cannot say. I only know that I must bring Karel back to me. If God has guided me so far, then let us pray that He will continue to do so.”

Her companion made a clumsy sign of the cross on her breast, and then she pushed the door inward. “You first. I fear I do not have the same protection that you do.”

Galina did not bother to argue. After all, this was her quest; Sasha was only an unexpected—if very welcome—attendant. She stepped inside, the robber girl at her heels, and made her way into the Queen’s stronghold.

It was a very elegant palace, all marble and gilt, but so cold within that Galya’s breath hung as clearly in the air as it had outside. She did not begrudge Sasha the muff she now carried, for the other girl had earned it and more. Still, it was so very, very cold.

There was no movement, no sign of life. The two girls peered into room after room, from salons and drawing rooms to dining rooms and libraries, and yet they did not see Karel, nor Tatiana Vasilievna, nor any retainers or servants.

Perhaps this wasn’t the Princess’ palace at all, but rather the home of some unknown Count or Prince, retired for the winter months to the sunnier climes of Italy or Greece. Galina would not rebuke Sasha, not when the girl had been such help, but she worried that somehow she had guided them to the wrong house.

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But then they passed through a great hall, where an icily perfect portrait of Princess Tatiana Vasilievna stared down at them from the damask-hung wall, and beyond that hall two enormous double doors yawned into a space that let forth an exhalation so icy that Galya was sure it had come straight from the North Pole itself. She shivered, even as Sasha sent her a questioning, frightened glance.

Somehow Galina knew she must go forward alone. She held up a hand, indicating that Sasha should wait in the hall, beneath the Princess' pale, freezing stare.

"No worries," Sasha said at once, and sat herself down on the marble floor, hands still tucked improbably into the muff.

It is for Karel, Galya told herself. She held the image of her friend in her mind, a stray memory from a summer sunlit day, when his eyes as he smiled down at her had put the blue of the sky to shame. He had brought her wildflowers that day, in bunches so large she could barely wrap her fingers around them. And it was the memory of that warmth which held her up as she strode forward into the freezing chamber.

The floor was ice, stretching before her as smooth as the rink below the walls of Novodevichy Convent. At its very center sat a chair so grand it could only be called a throne, carved all of wood dark as ebony, with an ice-blue cushion. And below the chair, crouched on the ice, Galina saw the dark, huddled form of a man.

She knew at once that man was Karel, and so she ran out onto the ice, even though her boots slipped and caught and threatened to throw her to her feet with almost every step. But she would not give up now, not when she was so close.

At the very end she did stumble and fall, but she only slid along the icy floor until she was only a few inches away from Karel. Even then he did not look up, but kept sifting pieces of what looked like thin shards of ice, setting them

together very much as one would the pieces of a puzzle.

"Why, Karel," Galina said. Somehow his odd concentration on such an inconsequential task frightened her more than the blizzard the night before, more than the robbers who had crowded the cave where Sasha lived. "Whatever are you doing?"

Finally he lifted his head and stared at her, although she saw no flicker of recognition in his eyes. "She said I should do this, that if I could spell the proper word I might be hers for all eternity. But I cannot find all the pieces, as you can see."

Galya's heart was wrung then, for she saw at once that he truly was bewitched. "Who said that? Princess Tatiana Vasilievna?"

He nodded slowly, still watching her with those uncomprehending eyes.

"Dear Karel," Galina said. She hesitated, trying to decide what on earth she could say to break the spell, to have him truly see her once again. At least he was looking at her, instead of those incomprehensible pieces of ice scattered around him.

Then it seemed so very clear. She must do the one thing that would remind him of warmth, of light and sunshine,

Of love.

She leaned forward, and carefully removed the gloves from her hands. Still he watched her, even as she raised her hands, now bare to the cold, and placed them on either cheek.

His skin felt scarcely warmer than the frigid air of the chamber around them, but it was enough. It had to be.

She drew closer, then laid her mouth against his.

At first he did not move, but only sat there, immobile, as if he had finally succumbed to the freezing air. Slowly then, so slowly that at first Galina was not sure she hadn't imagined it, his

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lips pressed against hers. And he lifted a hand, and another, and then it was him touching her face, his mouth exploring hers as a heat she could never have imagined flooded through her body.

“Galina,” he choked. His eyes shone bright with tears, and she watched as one slid down his cheek, glinting in the pale light that slanted through the chamber’s tall windows. On that cheek flashed something diamond-bright, something she knew was not a tear.

She reached out and caught that glittering speck, felt it sharp upon her fingertips. A drop of blood welled up there, shocking red in the white glare of the ice-filled room. *So that is how you caught him*, she thought, and deliberately bent down and wiped her finger against the icy floor, leaving a thin trail of red against the white.

“Will you come with me?” she asked.

Karel blinked. “Of course,” he said, and got to his feet. He extended a hand to her. “How did I come to be here?”

If he truly did not remember, then Galina saw no reason to task him for his defection. It had not been his fault, after all, but the black spells of the woman Sasha had called the Queen of Frost and Darkness. “A mote in your eye,” she said lightly. “But it is gone now. Are you ready to go home?”

“Yes,” Karel said at once. Then he paused, and looked down at her with eyes that once again recalled summer and a warmth she had almost forgotten. “That is, if I can share that home with you. Would you, Galya?”

It was not the proposal she had imagined, back in her rooms as she prepared for her coming-out ball. She had thought he would go down on one knee and say something exceedingly flowery. But that didn’t matter. Nothing mattered, save the look in his eyes.

“Yes, Karel Ivanovich,” she replied. “Yes, I would.”

Christine Pope is a native of Southern California whose fascination with bright, shiny objects has led her to write in a variety of genres. Her short fiction has appeared in *Astonishing Adventures* magazine and *Luna Station Quarterly*, as well as in *Dark Valentine* magazine. Her contemporary romance, *Fringe Benefits*, was published in April 2010 by Pink Petal Books, and her paranormal romance novella, *Playing With Fire*, was published in August 2010, also by Pink Petal Books. She has another paranormal romance, *Sympathy for the Devil*, that was released on December 2, 2010. Find out more at www.christinepope.com.

Jane Burson is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin with degrees in Textiles & Apparel Design, Business Administration Honors, and Liberal Arts Honors. She also studied at the University of Edinburgh and worked for L’Oreal marketing while studying in London. Jane is interested in folklore and fairytales, historic and ethnic fashion, and the textile arts. She currently lives in Texas. Jane has done periodic freelance design and illustration projects since high school. You can view more of her work at <http://janey-jane.deviantart.com>.

Christine Pope brings you a love story unlike anything you’ve read before...

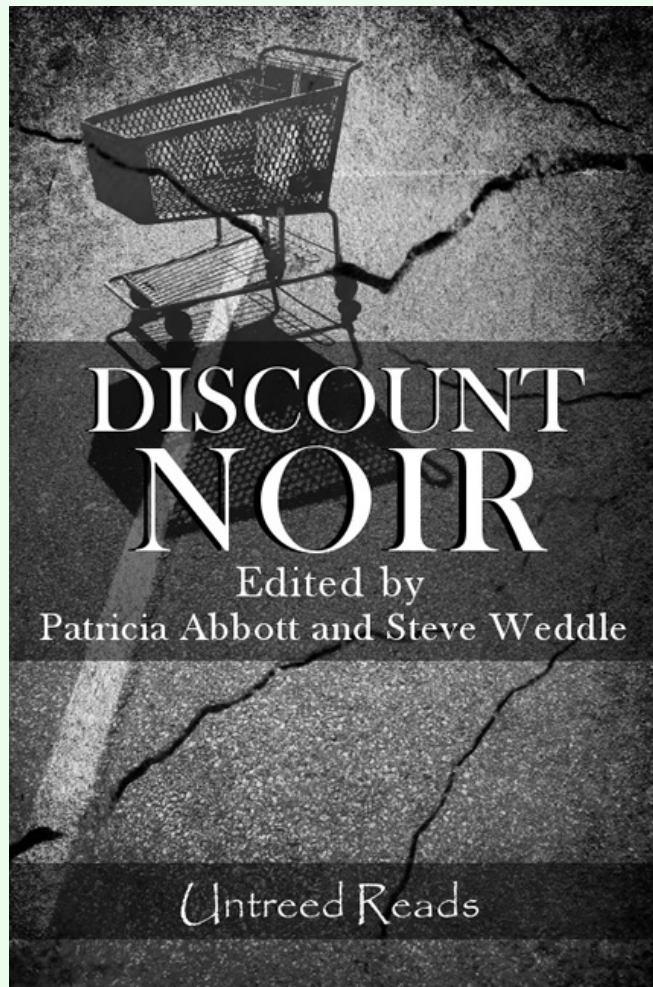
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