

**OUR  
WICKED  
GIFTS**



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*For all the cats I've loved*



# PROLOGUE

## Four Years Ago

The boy ran before we could kill him.  
'Find him, Cicely,' my mother, Allegra, sings. 'We don't have much time.'

Her words are silver and razor-edged, ringing in my head. They cut through my own thoughts until her instruction is all that matters. Refusing my mother is near impossible, although I've become better at it since I turned fifteen a few months ago. Sometimes, I can petulantly shove Allegra out of my mind and slam the door in her face. This task is too important for that.

Around me, the ash trees are dying in real time. Leaves blacken and shrivel. Cracked bark oozes a slimy substance that looks a lot like pus. The Ruin is usually hidden from sight, camouflaged behind our own world. But tonight, a tear has opened, and the Ruin is going to keep bleeding magic until it gets what it has been promised. It won't care if it's the boy who ran or one of us.

We have ten minutes, maybe less.

With shaky hands, I take a small box out of my pocket.

Inside, there's a dragonfly with a long, segmented abdomen, lacy wings and grotesquely bulbous eyes. I hate the things, but I need a conduit – something capable of existing in two worlds at the same time, through which magic can flow. The insect will serve to not only lead me into the Ruin, but also act as a tether so I can get back home.

I blow gently on the dragonfly and its wings hum into a blur of movement. It darts off between the trees and I follow it through the gossamer veil that separates everything we know from everything that lies beyond. Two worlds, overlaid on each other, reality blurring. I am one step into the Ruin, where life ebbs into death. The fading note at the end of a song. The drifting moment before falling asleep.

I'm the only living Winter who has to physically step into the Ruin to use my gift. The rest of my family pull on its magic from a distance while I go straight to the source. I can feel the magic as a faint thrum rising from the mulchy floor up into my bones. The world shapes itself to my own dreams and nightmares. Clusters of glistening fungus erupt in the indentations my feet leave behind. As I pass, ferns grasp at my hands like feathery-fingered children, wanting to lead me deeper into the Ruin. But the Ruin is no place for the living, and I know to never lose sight of what is real, no matter what tricks this realm tries to play on me.

I focus on the flitting movements of the dragonfly as it guides me through the undergrowth. The boy can't hide. It doesn't matter where he is. Curled in the hollow trunk of a fallen tree. Submerged in a muddy brook. Buried in wet, brown leaves. It doesn't matter that it's past midnight and clouds have diluted the moonlight to a watery glow. My gift will still lead me straight to him.

I pick my way down a steep slope. Thick, stinking mud soaks my canvas shoes. My hooded cloak does nothing to protect me from the screaming wind, plus it keeps snagging on brambles. It's an outfit better suited to sacrificing people to the Devil, not a woodland manhunt.

'You may as well come out,' I shout impatiently. 'I'm going to find you.'

I sweep my flashlight in a semicircle. The Ruin turns the trees into monsters, and their branches stretch towards me with terrible cracking sounds. I swallow heavily. Most fifteen-year-old girls would be terrified in this situation. And, yes, there's a big part of me that's barely keeping it together. Only, I'm not allowed to be like other fifteen-year-old girls. I'm a Winter. So I fight to keep my fear under control and I keep moving.

The boy gave us the slip while my family was finishing the evocation. As Allegra's spell opened a tunnel to the deepest depths of the Ruin and awoke the monster that lives down there, the boy punched Aunt Cynthia in the face and ran. He escaped before we could get to the part of the ritual specifying *who* should die. But the Ruin has been promised a soul and the Ruin always collects. If it's not him, it will be one of us. The sooner we fix this problem, the sooner we can go home.

I know I sound cold. Heartless, even. Only, this boy isn't a good person. He came to my house intending to kill my brother, Felix. If we don't stop him, he'll try again, and again, until he finally succeeds. And then he'll come for the rest of us, too. My cousin Sebastian's seen it with his own prophetic gift. Tonight, my family's future hangs in the balance. If the boy lives, the Winters will fall.

When you're a Winter, family comes first, and killing this boy is the only way to protect the people I love.

A twig snaps and I freeze. The dragonfly darts erratically, its wings crumbling as magic burns it from the inside out. What's left dusts the kraken-like roots of a fallen tree. There's a small space obscured by tangled fibres and clods of earth. A small space in which a secret hides. Every Winter has a gift that gives them power over others. My gift is for finding hidden things. A stolen necklace under the mattress, a love note from someone else's girlfriend, an incriminating photo . . . A boy who hoped the darkness would conceal him.

'I know where he is,' I shout.

Now that my insect is dead, I need to leave the Ruin before my tether to the living world fades. This tether is an innate knowledge of where reality lies, in the same way that a pianist's fingers find the right keys, or a gymnast knows exactly where the floor will be. If I were to stay in the Ruin untethered, one step would be enough to take me somewhere I could never return from. So, focusing my thoughts, I force my brain to perceive only what is real, and the Ruin falls away.

The shadows stop writhing; brightly coloured mushrooms disintegrate into dust. It's both a relief and a soul-deep sadness to be back in the real world – a world in which I would love to belong yet feel like I don't. Perhaps finding this troublesome boy will help convince my family that my strange, often unwieldy gift has a place among their own. Perhaps it will prove to them that I have what it takes to be a Winter. That my role as black sheep of this family isn't who I am.

I step closer to the tree where he hides. 'You can either come out on your own terms or we will drag you out.'

There's a moment of silence when the woods themselves seem to hold their breath. Then the boy emerges. He's a few years older than me. Eighteen, maybe, with white skin, messy brown hair and a sharp jawline streaked with mud.

Tonight's rushed past in a blur, so my family hasn't told me the full story yet. All I know is Sebastian saw something bad with his gift – a premonition painted in thick daubs of oil paint, dripping like blood – and the rest of us have to stop it from happening. This is the first time I've been trusted to help with such an important task, so I've been preoccupied with not wanting to screw up. But looking at the boy now, I realize there's something familiar about him. 'Why do I recognize you?' I ask.

'Are you serious? I'm your brother's *best friend*.' His voice quavers slightly, but his eyes don't leave mine.

'Oh.' Felix's friends come and go, and they all think they're his favourite until they're not. I don't pay them much attention.

His expression hardens. 'My name's Soren. You should at least remember the name of the person you're going to murder.'

'It's not murder,' I say weakly. 'Not after what you've done.'

His face cracks into a scornful smile and he shakes his head. 'And what have I done, exactly?'

'It's what you *would* have done. You came to the house planning to hurt Felix. You would have killed him if we hadn't stopped you.'

'Would I?'

'Sebastian saw it in a painting. He has a gift for seeing someone's true intentions.'

'Does he? You've seen this *gift* with your own eyes?'

He's trying to confuse me. I can't fall for his tricks. He's wicked. Only, he doesn't look wicked. The world would make

more sense to me if people looked like who they are on the inside. Fire for eyes. The number 666 tattooed across their foreheads. That sort of thing. The boy is a monster, I remind myself. He wouldn't hesitate to kill me if the tables were turned.

And yet. Here we are. The two of us, alone in the woods. And he hasn't made a single move to hurt me.

He laughs at my silence. 'You don't have an answer, do you? Love that you're willing to send someone to their death without even asking why.'

'Why?' I say quietly.

Our eyes lock. A wave of panic strikes me. I need to know the truth about this boy, but the Ruin's magic is upon us and so is my family.

Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Dorian emerge from the foliage and grab Soren by the arms. They drag him back to the fate he ran from. He makes it as hard for them as possible, digging his heels into the muddy ground and bracing his legs against the trees.

As I follow them through the woods, I take stock of every little movement. His muscles shifting beneath his thin T-shirt. The way his fingers flex and close into fists as he struggles. I can't wrap my head round the knowledge that, in less than a minute, the blood pumping in his veins will still and the thoughts firing in his brain will fizzle into nothing. It feels impossible. It feels wrong. He is so alive and, because of me, soon he will be dead.

My uncle strikes him across the face, sending him tumbling onto the leaves at Allegra's feet. We're back where we started the night, surrounded by a ring of trees daubed with goats' blood and soot. My mother, dressed in her robes, dagger in one hand, golden chalice in the other. My cousin Sebastian, concealed

at the tree line. Felix and the younger kids are safe at home, protected from this terrible thing we must do.

The boy pushes himself up onto his knees. 'You'll pay for this. I swear. You will pay,' he says, touching his mouth, blood transferring to his fingers.

'People like us don't pay for anything,' Uncle Dorian sighs. 'You, however ...'

The boy glances over his shoulder at what awaits him. Allegra's evocation opened not so much a hole in the forest floor as a tear in the fabric of reality. Beyond the stringy slime marking the tear's edges, I can see a barren wasteland dotted with sharp rocks and burnt forests. The tops of the skeletal trees are close enough to touch and yet so far away that I know no one who goes in there comes back out.

The boy's chest heaves with rapid breaths. His eyes find mine again and they are desperate and furious at the same time. He's crying, and I want it to be a trick. Monsters don't cry real tears.

My mother is muttering in Latin. The hood of her cloak hangs low over her face and I can only make out her red lipstick. I realize that my own hood has fallen down, so I quickly pull it back up.

Soren shakes his head. 'Got to make sure you look pretty for the Devil, right?'

'That's not ... I wasn't trying to look ...' I stop speaking. Winters don't explain or justify. We are better than that.

Black tendrils of an impossibly oily substance snake out of the hole. I call it the Dark, but truth is, I don't know what it is, just that it does *His* bidding. Dorian jokes the Dark is the Devil's dog: a pet that collects the souls destined for an eternity of misery in the Ruin, so the Devil doesn't have to get his hands dirty.

‘Cicely, I need the boy’s blood so the Dark knows who to take. Otherwise, it could pick one of us.’ Allegra holds out the knife to me. It’s a long, thin blade engraved with sigils; the ivory handle is inlaid with rubies.

I hesitate. I don’t think I can do it. ‘Mother, can’t someone else . . .’

‘Take it. Quickly.’ She places the dagger in my trembling hands and squeezes my fingers closed on the hilt. ‘You want to prove yourself a worthy member of this family, don’t you? Be a good girl and make me proud, Cicely.’

I nod and step towards the boy. He lifts his chin and stares defiantly at me. Behind him, the Dark’s tentacles snake further out of the hole, tasting the air, deciding who it wants. It doesn’t look like a dog. More like a gigantic sea anemone made out of literal death. It is everything and nothing at the same time, pulling on me with the gravity of a planet but also an empty window through which I can see the ends of the universe.

I stop, unable to move any closer to Soren. There’s a line and I don’t know if I can cross it. I want to prove myself. I want my family to accept me. I want to, finally, feel like I am one of them. But I can’t bring myself to hurt him.

Soren’s face hardens into a mocking smirk. ‘Coward.’ In a lightning-fast movement, he grabs my wrist, twisting it viciously. I cry out in pain and realize too late that I’ve let him take the weapon. He grips it with blood-smudged fingers, testing its weight, eyes narrowed. Inhaling sharply, I wait for him to strike, but he doesn’t. Instead, he hurls the knife at Allegra.

There’s a thud, and a howl, and my mother falls in a swirl of fabric. Her chalice falls, too, spilling its contents.

‘No!’ I scream, scrambling to her side. This is my fault. I

hesitated. I failed her. And now she's sprawled in a heap, a dagger embedded in her chest.

'Move,' Dorian orders, shoving me hard. He rolls Allegra onto her back. The knife's struck her close to her heart. Thankfully she's breathing; albeit in short, pained gasps. She's still conscious.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' I sob.

'His blood's on the handle,' she manages to whisper.

Dorian quickly swipes his finger across the bloody smear on the knife and dips it into the dregs of liquid left in the chalice. He throws the whole thing at the Dark and it vanishes into the blackness of the monster's body. The Dark's tendrils immediately reach for the boy and ensnare his arms. One coil tries to wriggle into his mouth, but he cranes his head away from it. The veins on his neck are sharply defined; every muscle is straining.

Despite his terror, he blows me a scornful kiss. 'Great to catch up, Cicely. Do stay in touch.'

I want to look away, but I can't.

'What, no goodbye? And here I was thinking we had—' His words turn into a scream as the tendrils yank him backward into the hole. He screams and screams, and then silence. The Dark retreats and the hole knits itself closed. A narrow scar across the ground is all that remains. The boy – Soren – is gone.

I try to tell myself that he deserved it.

These days, I'm not so sure.





I've never attended a party I didn't hate. The Winter Institute summer masquerade is no exception.

The theme is extinct and endangered animals, and everyone wears the face of something dead or dying. Siberian tigers, loggerhead sea turtles, monarch butterflies. Black tie from the neck down, creepy masks from the neck up.

Half-human, half-monster, my mother's guests prowl an oasis of greenery. The vast event space, with its sleek architectural lines and vaulted ceiling, has been crammed full of hundreds of freshly felled trees and cut flowers. Creepers loop down from above, creating lush curtains that ripple invitingly. Fabulous butterflies the size of both my hands flap against the walls, confused by the jazz band's bone-shuddering tempo. By morning, most of the butterflies will lie dead on the petal-strewn floor.

The overall effect is my worst nightmare.

No, that's not entirely correct. The Ruin is my worst nightmare, along with the knowledge that it's exactly where I, along with every other Winter, will be heading when I die. Pacts with the Devil come at a price, after all, even if the choice was made for me a hundred years before I was born, by my great-grandmother Edith.

But this party is definitely in my Top Ten Places I'd Rather Not Be.

The clammy pads of my fingers tap a rhythm on the balcony railing, growing faster the more anxious I become. There are too many people in this room and even watching them from up here makes me claustrophobic. I cringe as an actress with red squirrel ears stumbles into a music producer with a golden toad mask made of actual gold. Nearby, a sweaty tech billionaire with a thylacine's face is grinding against a panda with conspicuously fake boobs. I'm sure there's a metaphor in there somewhere, but I'm too distracted to work it out.

My biggest problem, in addition to the swarms of people, is that my own dress is literally the most uncomfortable thing I've ever worn. My mother had it custom-made for me, inspired by the union rustic moth, or *Pabulatrix pabulatricula*, if Latin's your thing. I should be pleased that she went to such an effort for me. I *am* pleased. Only, the fur bodice is making me sweat and one of my antennae has already poked a member of the Danish royal family in the eye. Also, I keep standing on the moth wing cloak. I despise cloaks, although my mother couldn't have been expected to remember that.

'You look like you're having the best time, all alone,' my twenty-three-year-old brother, Felix, says, slouching beside me.

Felix is dressed in a white tux paired with a half-face wolf mask. With his sweeping golden locks and the casual confidence of an impossibly rich white man, his overall look is part playboy, part predator. When he smiles, though, Felix is so disarmingly beautiful most people at the party would willingly offer him their throat. His gift seals the deal. A single hair plucked from your scalp and wound round his little finger, and Felix will

mould his personality into whoever you want him to be. The perfect friend, the love of your life, beloved brother.

I force my tapping fingers to still and check his. No strand of hair. Felix is being himself. I like Felix best when he's real. The two of us used to be much closer, but Allegra's *accident* in the woods four years ago changed things between us. Since that day, our interactions often have an edge to them, as if we're both forever aware that we can only relax around each other when Allegra isn't looking.

'Don't have too much fun. Save some for me,' he draws.

I snort. Parties are the antithesis of fun, if you ask me. The only reason I'm attending tonight is because Allegra insisted. Usually, she allows me to stay home, where I won't accidentally offend someone by saying the wrong thing or pulling the wrong face, or ruin my family's sharp lines with my soft edges. But every now and again, I'm forced to show up for appearances' sake. So I'll find myself a quiet corner in which to hide, and I'll dwell on how no one wants to talk to me, even though it's not like I want to talk to them, either.

'It's a zoo down there.' I gesture limply at the sea of bodies churning beneath us. They move as one, lost in a shared rhythm that makes no sense to me. I can't believe anyone's enjoying themselves. 'Look at them all. They're pathetic.'

Felix grins at me over the rim of his champagne glass. '*They* are also some of the world's richest and most influential people. The Winter Institute's most generous benefactors.'

'The fact that they're rich doesn't make them interesting,' I sigh. 'If I had billions to my name, I'd not be wasting it trying to bring woolly mammoths back to life.'

For years, my mother has been hosting events to rival even the

Met Gala, raising funds for the Winter Institute's unextinction project. It's her calling in life: to rescue species from the brink of oblivion or outright bring them back from the dead. Under her leadership, the Institute has achieved feats of science no one believed was possible and not a week goes by when Allegra isn't invited to appear on some talk show or give a prestigious lecture.

Her biggest dream is to resurrect the woolly mammoth. It's a tricky, expensive task but there's no shortage of donors wanting to be part of Allegra Winter's next triumph. It helps that, thanks to her gift, people find it *extremely* hard to say no to my mother.

'If you had her money, what would you waste it on?' Felix asks.

I try to come up with an answer, but I've got nothing. Money's never been all that interesting to me. The power wielded by my family, though? The way all of them command the attention of every room they enter. Their confidence, their poise. How they seem to matter without trying. Well, I'd gladly take a little of that.

'I'd buy an island.' Felix answers his own question with an idle pursing of his lips. 'And I'd populate it with girls who'd feed me shrimp while I lie in the shade.'

'Sounds hideous. For the girls, I mean.'

He shrugs nonchalantly. 'They'd be lining up to audition.'

I swallow what's left of my drink. I can't argue with Felix. They would. 'One day, you'll be able to live that dream,' I tease. 'You're the oldest and you're going to inherit everything.'

Felix's flinches, although he tries to mask his discomfort with acerbic wit. 'How could I ever forget? I've been in training as Allegra's heir since conception. I had a business and economics tutor when I was a literal fetus.'

'How does that even work?'

‘Headphones on the baby bump. To this day, I can only fall asleep to the sound of Jeff Bezos giving motivational talks.’

I laugh. ‘Then why are you so terrible at business?’

‘Because I’d rather live while I’m young, dear Cicely. One day, I’ll be one of *them*, but not today.’

A passing waiter pauses next to us with a bottle of champagne. I ignore him while he silently refills my glass, his head lowered. I turn my attention to the dance floor, where my eyes are immediately drawn to my lovely mother. She shimmies to the music, her face lit up with pleasure as every eye follows her graceful movements. Looking at her evokes a combination of pride and pressure in me. Pride that she’s my mother. Pressure that *she’s my mother*.

Tonight, Allegra’s wearing a short dress covered in the green and orange feathers of an endangered sun conure parrot. Her mask is a stylized bird, inlaid with hundreds of emeralds and fire opals. She is surrounded by dozens of animal-faced admirers, vying for one of her smiles or laughs. And she doles them out generously, like the gracious host she is.

Allegra is the shining star around which everything else revolves, the centre of gravity forever pulling you in. Sometimes, the weight of it makes me feel like I’m being crushed alive. Maybe if I were stronger, I’d settle into my own orbit. The rest of the family have managed to find where they belong, after all.

Felix occupies the Goldilocks zone, where our mother’s light seems made for him. My younger sister, Octavia, performs a perfect aerial ballet as close as possible to Allegra, never setting a single foot wrong lest she burn alive in our mother’s radiance. My Uncle Dorian, with his moon-ish wife Cynthia, is something of a Jupiter. His gravitational pull can’t so much

move Allegra as slightly alter her path. My cousins, Sebastian and Melissa, occupy the further reaches, safe from the heat but not from the cold.

‘My theory is she wants to turn herself into a god with power over life and death,’ I say. ‘That’s what this unexinction thing is about.’

When Felix doesn’t laugh at what I thought was a good quip, I flick my eyes over to him. He’s pushed the wolf mask on top of his head and is frowning as he reads a note scribbled on a creased piece of paper. His hair still manages to curl into the perfect blond waves that Allegra likes to stroke off his forehead.

‘What’s that?’ I ask.

‘Nothing.’ He quickly pockets the paper and flashes me a cocky smile. ‘That waiter passed me a note. From one of my admirers.’ He glances over his shoulder, as if he’s looking for said note-delivering waiter. ‘Got to go. Tell Allegra something came up.’

‘Are you serious? Felix, we’re onstage in fifteen. For the presentation.’

Ignoring me, he ditches his champagne on a table and marches away. Allegra is going to blame me for failing to stop Felix from leaving. Golden boy Felix can do no wrong in Allegra’s eyes. His gift makes him the perfect son.

I watch Felix as he crosses the dance floor, effortlessly parting the sea of guests. Felix strides through life without ever questioning his own worth. The sun shines for him and the entire universe exists to be his backdrop. I never know if I’m disgusted or plain jealous of the longing stares that follow in his wake. Tonight, it’s not only admiration that trails behind him. It’s a secret.

I don't need my gift to see that he's hiding something big. That note from the waiter has scared him, and apex predators like Felix don't scare easily. In fact, the last time I saw him looking this terrified was the night I nearly killed our mother as we banished that boy to the Ruin. It's been four years and I can still picture every little moment. Soren's fear-stained bravado; the sound the knife made as it struck my mother in the chest; Felix's anguish when we returned from the woods carrying Allegra's limp body.

None of them have fully forgiven me. Allegra spent two weeks in the hospital, another eight slowly recuperating at home. To this day, the scar still causes her pain, as if a shard of my betrayal remains in the wound, preventing it from completely healing. We told the press that she was attacked by a stalker; the police even arrested someone for the crime. My family knows the truth: I stabbed my mother in the heart.

These aren't memories I want to dwell on. I try to wash the thoughts away with my glass of champagne. They stubbornly don't budge. One of the butterflies lands on my arm. It shudders as dark magic takes hold, the Ruin determined to lead me to a secret even if I'd rather ignore the pull. The butterfly flutters off after my brother, its wings already trailing glitter as it burns up from the inside. My gift claws away at my resolve, desperate for me to follow the unwilling insect guide to the Ruin, and to the note hidden in Felix's pocket.

Here's the thing with secrets: they're everywhere. Like insects, secrets exist in both worlds at the same time – because what is the Ruin if not a world of lost and hidden things? The vast majority of secrets that seep through the cracks go ignored. One thing the Ruin does seem to care about is chaos. Upsetting

the natural order. Altering the course of fate. If it discovers a secret that's capable of changing the status quo, you can bet it's going to try to make sure I find it, against my will if necessary.

Felix's secret must be a weighty one. What I don't know is if my uncovering it will help or harm. In my nineteen years on Earth, peeking behind my family's veil of perfection has rarely ended well. No one likes someone casually discovering the things they try to hide, especially the things they hide even from themselves; little reminders that they're not the people they want to be, laid bare for all to see. It's hard to be a sister, daughter, niece, cousin *and* the self-righteous voice pointing out my family's flaws.

The sensible choice would be to forget about the waiter and his mysterious note. The sensible choice would be to walk away.

My gift's not going to let me walk away. It's going to pull, and pull, and pull, until I give in.

Resigned, I take a single step after that cursed butterfly, and the world hidden beyond our own immediately drifts into view. The creepers overhead coil into snakes. Trumpet-like mushrooms squeeze through the gaps between the walls and the flooring. The walls bubble and I can see things moving beneath the cracking layer of paint. They're my own nightmares, I know that. But the harder I wrestle to control them, the more they fight against me.

I focus on the butterfly. It tethers me to the living world, ensuring my physical body remains where it's supposed to be while only my consciousness drifts. If I were to walk into the Ruin untethered, *all of me* would slip inside this place of nightmares. As long as I keep my attention on my little guide, I won't stray that far. I follow it downstairs onto the dance floor.

Everything immediately becomes too hot and too loud. The live jazz band has kicked up their tempo and the Ruin twists the partygoers into leering monsters. The masks are gone and I'm surrounded by people with jagged scars encircling their necks, where their human skin becomes an animal's pelt. Muzzles and snouts growl and grunt as I pass. This was a mistake. Controlling the Ruin's magic is too hard when it comes to my family members' secrets. They bring out the worst in me, because they have the power to hurt me.

The butterfly dissolves into dust, the magic too much for its tiny body to endure for long. Felix's secret is too far away for me to follow. I immediately try to step back into the real world but the Ruin won't release me. I can still feel my tether, but I can't pull myself free of the magic. It clings to me and refuses to let go. As a kid, I had a recurring nightmare about being trapped beneath ice in a frozen river, my lungs screaming for air, palms slapping the unbreakable surface. That panic is how I feel now.

My heart hammering like I actually might drown, I try to reach for something real – someone's hand, warm and slightly clammy, or the solid reassurance of a familiar object – that I can use to pull my consciousness back. With every passing second, I can sense less and less of the living world and, without the butterfly, any step I take will lead me even further from reality. This is literally how my grandmother Genevieve died. Lost in the Ruin, unable to find her way home.

Then the crowd shifts and there's a man standing motionless among the partygoers. Dressed in black, he's a monochrome island among the vibrant outfits. Most of his deathly pale face is hidden by a skull mask. It has an elongated nose like a fox's

and huge, empty eye sockets that remind me of a primate, albeit strangely mournful. He's watching me.

His stillness – his wrongness – makes my stomach turn somersaults. He's motionless, but he's not relaxed. He reminds me of an animal primed to attack, tensed muscles and unwavering focus. Even though I know it will take me further from reality, I turn and I run.

Only, there he is again, standing in front of me. I don't know how he moved so fast. I think he's the one holding me in the Ruin, a footstep and a million miles from everything I know. That kind of power is unlike anything I've ever experienced. It draws me in and repels me at the same time.

The surging crowd shifts and I lose sight of the man. It's worse, somehow. Not knowing where he is. My heart is pounding so hard I think it might beat its way out of my chest. The tempo of the music is dizzying.

A prickle down my spine freezes me to the spot. I can smell magic, heavy and cloying. I can *taste* it on the back of my tongue. Cold breath grazes the nape of my neck.

'The Winters are a plague,' a soft voice says. 'Are you one of them?'

Fingers lightly brush mine and sparks pass between us. I should be terrified, and I am, but I also feel like I *know* this man. Something in him calls to me and I can't help but yearn to answer. Suddenly, the girls who turn their throats towards Felix's jaws make sense to me. I want to close my eyes and relax back into this man's arms, damn the consequences. Even falling feels like flying, until you hit the ground.

A split second later, my common sense returns in a rush. I snatch my hand away, pulling it to my chest, and I turn to face

the man. Only, there's no one there except for the Ruin-twisted partygoers, their eyes unfocused and their movements frantic.

I catch sight of him, standing deeper in the crowd. His lips break into a slow grin. He lifts one finger and slowly drags it across his throat, eyes still locked on me. Blood pours down the walls in an unstoppable torrent, drenching the dancing crowd. They writhe to the music, lost in the crashing rhythm. The man grins and grins.

Then, in an instant, the Ruin dissipates. The blood vanishes, as do the nightmarish faces in the crowd, and the insects and the fungi and the snakes.

The man vanishes, too, as if he was never there.