

SCREAMING SPIRES: PRE-PUBLICATION EXTRACT

Prologue – The Roundheads

“I don’t want my daughter dragging into this again,” Sam said firmly. He’d lost the will to argue with his companions long ago, but now his fists clenched and he felt filled with determination.

The grand entrance hall of the ancient castle was cold and dark, in a way that neither the roaring fire nor the iron chandelier heaving under the weight of hundreds of dripping candles could dispel entirely. Sam’s eyes could see perfectly through the darkness, and he couldn’t feel the cold. Still his mind and body desired light and warmth, for the feeling of safety and happiness they could create rather than for any physical need.

“You’re so terribly naive. In many ways, so very human still,” said Tribulation, one of Sam’s strange companions. His red eyes narrowed to slits as he spoke. “We need her trinket, that’s all. The mother must come to us as bait, but no harm need befall the girl.”

Tribulation clearly saw the human comment as an insult, but Sam felt only relief at his words. He strode defiantly across the rough, dusty flagstones to stand closer to his supposed allies, who were all waiting expectantly by the giant double doors to the outside world. It meant leaving the relative comfort of the fire, but he was determined to prove a point.

“That’s what you claimed last time. You gave the boy our best weapons. What was the result? No necklace, the knife lost, only a few minor Cavaliers dead. And oh yes, my daughter brutalised.”

They’d hidden the details from him when their spies had brought the news of the failure of the Roundheads’ plan, but he’d got the picture. Archie had lost control, hurt Harriet. Had he come back victorious, Sam would have killed him himself. Slowly.

“Involving a Cavalier was a mistake,” Temperance, another of the guards, said through his deformed lips. He was standing to attention by the doors, staring straight ahead with an expression of total certainty. “Even a Cavalier who’d supposedly repented of their ways. The blood is tainted. He was always going to be weak, driven by revenge.”

Not for the first time, Sam wondered how he had come to be living like this. All he’d ever wanted was a middle class suburban life. London had been bad enough. This dark and draughty castle in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in eastern Europe that he wasn’t sure he’d be able to find on a map, was not the sort of place he’d ever hoped to call home.

As for his companions, he was never sure whether the deformed henchmen or their seductive and sinister leader alarmed him the most. Still, it was all better than the alternative, and whilst he'd never have considered himself a vengeful man in his previous life, the thought of revenge kept him strong.

“When I heard his story, I thought he could be trusted. I was so sad to hear about the death of my niece. I believed this Archie had truly loved Stephanie, so I didn't think he'd be able to hurt my daughter.”

“All the spies said they looked very similar,” Tribulation said.

For a moment, he thought he could see a flash of sympathy in those flaming eyes, but then it faded. “Their mothers were twins,” he said wistfully. “Stephanie's mother was the only person I've ever met who was as beautiful and vibrant as Adie. Not that ever let me meet her often. My wife was scathing about everyone, but there was no one she hated as much as Amelia.”

“And the younger generation? Did they feel the same?” Piety, the third guard, asked. He had ragged batwings that hung limply by his side. Sam often wondered if Piety could fly or transform fully, but he'd never seen him do it, and he was far too politely English to ask such a personal question.

Sam felt his rage begin to build. “How would I know? By the time they were old enough for human interactions, I was dead to the world. Holed up in this place.”

Temperance gave him something that could almost pass for a reassuring look. “Humility will get the necklace and get out. Harriet won't be harmed. Then you can focus on the mother.”

At that moment, the great wooden doors swung open, letting in the moonlight and making the room colder than ever. Sam shuddered. He knew what was coming next and wished, as he had every night for the past seventeen years, that there was a way he could stop it. He felt sick, even though that was meant to be physically impossible.

Sure enough, it was Rick and Alfie. The two brothers looked almost identical, dressed in black trenchcoats, their long dark hair gelled back and a touch of eyeliner around their piercing blue eyes. They were the two most attractive members of the group, (which admittedly wasn't hard) though Sam couldn't help but think they'd look better if they toned down the gothic look. He'd even suggested it once, but they'd just laughed. Nearly two millennia old and they insisted on dressing like moody teenagers. They'd been born Goths, Visigoths to be precise, and the concept of looking like the modern version amused them.

They were each holding an unconscious girl under each arm. With a smile, they dropped them to the ground.

“Tuck in, everybody,” Rick said, shrugging off his heavy jacket to reveal the tattooed arms beneath - some blue and ancient, hacked into his arms by tribal elders in another life, some only a few years old, courtesy of the finest inkers in LA. “It’s been a long journey so you’d better enjoy them.”

“Where is Member-of-the-Elect?” Sam asked warily. The VGG brothers (as they called themselves) made him nervous, but as a guest and an integral part of their leader’s plan, he was able to speak to them in a way that would have made most older vampires hesitate.

“Fea you mean?” Alf said, grinning. “You know I don’t hold with this puritan naming crap.”

Like the puritans of old, the Roundheads, regardless of their religious beliefs, tended to name themselves after obscure biblical virtues. As far as Sam was concerned, it only added to the odd atmosphere of the place.

“I don’t know why the two of you don’t just join the Cavaliers,” Tribulation said. “The way you look, the way you dress, your total lack of respect for our traditions.”

Officially, the two brothers’ Roundhead names were Fight-the-Good-Fight and Help-On-High, but it had never really stuck. Certainly, no one dared call them that to their face.

“Two reasons. First of all, Augustine is so hung up on the past that he’d never let us in,” Rick began.

“And secondly, they’d frown on us doing this,” Alfie finished.

He pulled the first girl to her feet, and touched her head lightly so that she woke up. She looked around her in confusion. Her words weren’t English, but Sam had picked up enough of the local language to understand.

“What happened? Who are you? I was walking home and then...”

She glanced around her, clearly frantic. Sam watched as her eyes fell on the others, the hideous, deformed vampires that were barely recognisable as human and sure enough, she began to scream. Not bothering to shut her up or to mesmerise her, Alfie lunged for her neck and drank deeply. The screaming intensified.

Sam felt once more the horrible mix of sadness, horror and fury that had become a regular part of his life over the last twenty years. He wished Alfie would at least put her under. Once or twice he’d intervened and mesmerised one of their victims himself, but he’d been warned in no uncertain terms not to do so again.

“It takes half the fun out of it when they’re not aware. And it’s just such a break with tradition.”

All around him, the other girls were being woken up by various members. The scene was depressingly similar in each case – the confusion, the screaming, the attack. Eventually, someone thrust one of the girls towards him. He often resisted, leaving him weak, but after a few days, he always had to relent. The girl was mercifully unconscious now, not much of her blood left. If he had to drink, he liked to do so in the middle of the process. The only thing worse than the screaming at the beginning was taking the last drop and feeling someone die in your arms. He’d only done that once, the night he was turned.

The others laughed at Sam’s compunction. Most of them fought amongst themselves for the honour of getting the last drop. They found it hard to understand how he’d kept most of his human emotions and morals intact.

Sam felt hungry enough to have no choice but to participate. To his shame, he found the few sips utterly delicious. He was reluctant to pass the girl back to Temperance, but had no choice. His companion enthusiastically finished her off. The other bodies quickly dropped to the floor.

“You should see the look on your face,” said a voice behind him. He turned to see their leader, who must have entered through one of the passages towards the back of the hall. “Nearly twenty years and you’ve still not come to terms with this have you?”

The leader was smartly dressed, perfectly groomed and even more unusually, female. She was a tiny creature, less than five feet tall with long, red hair that she usually wore up, but which when it was loose like today, almost touched the floor. Anyone coming upon their little group would have assumed her to be the least dangerous person in the room, but they couldn’t have been more wrong. Depending on whom you believed, she was either the second or first most powerful vampire in existence.

“Don’t worry, it will be over soon,” Fea said, stroking Sam’s hair in a way that he assumed was meant to be either seductive or reassuring, but which made him feel terrified.

“You’ll have the revenge that you seek, and then you can move on and have a marginally more normal life. Live the way they do – take a job and a house, get the blood you need with charm and persuasion and your powers. It’s ironic. Of all of us, you’re the one who’d most naturally fit on the other side. And yet despite Rick and Al’s claims, of all of us, even me, you’re the one Augustine would be the least willing to take in. He’d kill you on sight if he knew you lived, but at the same time, you’re the only one who can really hurt him in the one way he’ll feel.”

“She chose him twice. How can I compete?”

“Did she? We’ll know for sure in six months time. But for the moment, don’t believe everything you hear about past lives.”

PART ONE - THE LONG VACATION

Chapter One

Caroline woke up with the worst hangover she could remember. Through the pain in her head and the nausea, she looked around the dimly lit room. *Where the hell am I?* There was no natural light at all, just bare stone walls and a high ceiling. She’d never seen anything like it. Despite the odd surroundings, the bed she was in had soft pillows and a warm duvet, so was surprisingly comfortable.

What on earth happened last night? She’d been to the Cavaliers’ party, that much she could remember. It had been great fun, and Ben had been selected, but after that it had all been a blur. *How much did I drink?* Remembering Ben made her panic again. *Where is he? Please don’t tell me I went home with someone else.* The fact she was lying naked and hungover didn’t bode well.

She noticed a glass of water on the table by the bed and gratefully grabbed it. Explanations could wait. For the moment, her thirst was the most pressing concern. She’d always been told to drink a pint of water before bed after a night out and usually never failed to do so, but that must not have been the case last night. Caroline downed the water, but the thirst didn’t abate. Neither did her headache. She considered getting up to look for more water and for some painkillers, but couldn’t quite face it. Besides, she’d risk running into whoever owned this room. She closed her eyes and tried to settle back down, reasoning that everything would be better in an hour or two.

“Ah excellent. I see you’re awake. That was a longer than usual lapse period.”

The voice filled Caroline with a sense of dread. It wasn’t Ben, and she had a horrible suspicion who it might be. She considered pretending to be asleep, but quickly relented and opened her eyes.

George was standing there watching her, naked from the waist up, fresh from the shower. His long blond hair was wet and plastered around his face, and whatever he’d washed with

had left him smelling faintly of spices. Caroline had never seen a more attractive sight. Nonetheless, she was horrified.

“Please say we didn’t,” she sighed, dragging herself into a sitting position and carefully pulling the cover up around her to hide her nakedness.

“Would it be so terrible if we had?” George smirked as he walked towards the bed. “Do you find me that repulsive?”

“Where’s Ben?” Caroline replied frantically. “He’ll never forgive me.”

“Considering that your beloved Ben tried to kill you last night, and technically succeeded, I don’t think he’s in any position to complain. Although for what it’s worth, no. Nothing happened. You’ve been out cold since I took you from the party.”

Caroline could hardly focus on his words. Her headache pounded, her vision was blurred and everything seemed somehow unreal.

“I’m not even going to ask what you mean about Ben trying to kill me. You’re obviously talking crap. I always warned Harriet about you. I don’t know how I ended up in your room. Forget that for a moment though. Do you have any painkillers? Any more water?”

George laughed as he flung himself down on the bed. “You always warned Harriet off? How interesting. If I’d known, I might not have gone to all this trouble. Is it my filmstar looks or my sparkling personality that you find so objectionable?”

Caroline didn’t have enough strength for an argument and didn’t want to antagonise him, but couldn’t let that go. “I think it was the time you tried to stab her,” she snapped.

George smiled at the memory. “Oh that. So she never did explain what really happened. Fascinating. But believe me, you’ll understand my motivation soon enough. It’s not painkillers you need. It’s not food or water either. I’ll sort you out though, don’t worry.”

Caroline was uncomfortably aware of George’s presence beside her. She’d never spent time alone with him before. Despite her pain and her panic, she was beginning to understand why Harriet had always found him so difficult to resist, even though she had a wonderful boyfriend, even though he terrified her. She wondered what Harriet would think about her waking up in his bed.

“So where are we?” She asked, trying to get the conversation back onto a more normal footing.

“In the crypts under Christ Church Cathedral. I have a normal room in college too of course, but this feels more like home. So much safer, so much more private and intimate.”

Caroline laughed weakly. “Seriously? Does the college know?”

“Oh those who matter do. It’s all above board.” He looked at her more seriously, and lightly touched her arm. “This isn’t getting us anywhere though. We need to see this through. Get up and get dressed.”

Caroline hesitated, not wanting George to see her naked.

He laughed at her hesitation. “I saw everything I needed to see last night. Don’t worry, I didn’t take advantage. I just thought you’d be more comfortable out of that tight, boned dress. Besides, I didn’t want to mess up the sheets.”

Caroline considered punching him, but decided to show her disdain by just getting up and getting ready. She was proud of her gym and yoga honed body. Let him look if he wanted to. She could see her dress was hanging neatly off a stand by the bed.

George made no effort to look away, but nor did he stare at her naked figure. A tiny bit of her mind couldn’t help but wish he were nude as well. She was surprised by the abs and muscles, usually hidden under his Ralph Lauren polos and Jermyn Street shirts, and wondered how much of him Harriet had ever seen. She’d never been able to shake off the feeling her friend was hiding something from her as far as George was concerned.

Every movement felt painful, as though she’d had a marathon gym session the day before. She walked slowly, scared she was about to faint. Somehow though, she reached the stand and wriggled into her dress. It felt constricting and uncomfortable, adding to her sense of breathlessness.

“Can you help me with the zip?” She asked George as calmly as possible, hoping she wasn’t encouraging him. She expected some sort of arrogant comment, he just nodded and quickly and efficiently zipped her up, then stood looking at her with an expectant look on his face, as though waiting for her to notice something.

Caroline smoothed the dress down and glanced around her for a mirror. It was usually too much to expect in a guy’s room, but George seemed more than a little vain. She noticed a full-length one to the right of the bed, and stepped in front of it, dreading what she might see. She never looked her best the morning after a heavy night and, despite not wanting anything to do with him, it would be too humiliating for the beautiful George to see her looking like a wreck.

The first thing she noticed was she actually didn’t look bad at all. In fact, she was glowing. Caroline ran her hands over her hair, which looked a bit blonder and glossier than usual. Her eyes were a brighter blue, even though she’d spent last night drinking and partying. She touched her cheek and found that her skin was clearer and smoother than any facial had ever managed to make is. Her waist seemed thinner and her breasts curvier. The

only bad part was that, in spite of yesterday's tanning session, she looked terribly pale. She didn't understand.

She spent a moment staring at this "after picture" version of herself before she spotted the stains on her red dress. All along the neckline, she saw dark marks, as though she'd spilt an entire glass of red wine all over herself. She inspected one of the stains gingerly. It seemed to have dried, but that at least made sense of George's explanation about not wanting to stain the bed.

As she continued to stare, she noticed a large wound across the left side of her neck. She touched it and felt a stab of pain. It wasn't bleeding and seemed to be healing fast, but she knew it hadn't been there last night.

"Don't worry about that," George said, more gentle than she'd ever heard him before. He walked up behind her and put his hands on her shoulder. "You look beautiful, but you must be feeling terrible. I can just about remember the experience."

"What happened last night? What's wrong with my neck? That's blood on my dress, isn't it? Tell me!" Caroline's felt a burst of hysteria breaking through the lethargy that had plagued her since she woke up.

"You need to feed. Then everything will make more sense," he whispered soothingly. "There's no point in me trying to explain beforehand."

Caroline's stomach gurgled threateningly at the thought of food.

"Feed? The state I'm in I'm not sure I could keep anything down, but okay, I'll try. How about a fry up at Browns? I'll just have a coffee if all the grease is too much."

"Unfortunately that would involve going outside which I'm afraid isn't an option. Don't worry though, breakfast will be delivered. Let's go into the Cathedral."

"I can't go out like this, George." Caroline felt horribly disorientated, as though she was caught up in a complicated game and no one would explain the rules. "I'm covered in blood, and I'm wearing last night's clothes. God knows what anyone is going to think of me."

"What God or anyone else thinks of you is no longer your concern. Besides, they'll see what you want them to see. Come on. We need to move fast before the sun comes up. The light will only hurt your eyes."

Caroline could see the logic in that. There was nothing worse than a hangover on a hot June morning, and she hadn't taken her customary sunglasses to the party.

George pulled on a sweater, and still full of confusion, she followed him up a rickety staircase, through a trapdoor and into the Cathedral.

Looking around her, Caroline reflected that she really ought to do more sightseeing whilst she was in Oxford. She'd laughed at the tourists who wandered around the colleges and took endless photographs, and she'd scorned Olamide's suggestions of trips to the Castle and up St Mary's Tower.

The Cathedral was impressive though. She knew from some of her history reading it was the smallest cathedral in England. What it lacked in size, it made up for in splendour, all stained glass windows, statues and tombs. It was still dark, just, and huge shadows filled the room, highlighted by the few candles still burning. Despite this, Caroline was surprised at how well she could see. Indeed, she could pick out some of the features of the gargoyles way up in the roof. Every few seconds by contrast, everything would blur out, before snapping back into perfect focus.

"How religious is your family?" George asked suddenly.

Caroline thought this was a rather strange question, and wondered why he asked. "Well, you know, it's that standard English middle class half-hearted Church of England deal. Church at Easter, Christmas, weddings and funerals. I had a christening that was mainly an excuse for a family party. I pop down to Lilith's chapel on the occasional Sunday. Why?"

George looked at her critically. "Well, that doesn't sound as bad as my upbringing, but I'd stay away from the crucifixes and the more over the top statues of saints if I were you."

Caroline wanted to ask him what he was talking about. She remembered the morning she'd sat with a hysterical Harriet who'd cried and told her what George had done. For all his charm and beauty, was he just a complete lunatic? Before she could challenge his comments, she heard a voice, which caught her by surprise. She'd expected the cathedral to be deserted this early in the morning.

"Olamide, are you there? For goodness sake, come out and talk to me, don't play stupid games. I need my sleep."

"It's Callum," she whispered to George. "You've probably never met him, but he used to go out with my friend Olamide. He's literally the most boring guy I've ever met. She can be a bit too keen sometimes, but he actually broke up with her for not working hard enough."

"I know," George replied. "Go and talk to him. Tell him Olamide asked you to meet him here and take him to her. Then lead him back into the crypt. If you hit difficulties, I'll help, but try your best first."

Caroline hesitated for a moment, wondering what this was all about. All she wanted was some coffee and Paracetamol, then to find Ben and go back to bed. A confrontation with

Olamide's ex was definitely not on her to-do list. Nonetheless, there was something about George's tone that made it difficult to resist.

George faded into the shadows as she stepped forward. "Callum, it's me, Caroline," she shouted.

She heard the sharp intake of breath. Callum's nerves must have been stretched to the limit by walking around the eerie cathedral in the dark, and her sudden appearance had probably given him a shock. After a moment, however, he shuffled towards her.

Callum, all ginger hair and skinny frame, had never seemed very impressive to Caroline, but looking at him now, huddled nervously under a statue, she felt utter contempt, as though he was a different, lesser species.

"What are you doing here Caroline? I should have known you'd have been behind this. You or Harriet. Is she hiding somewhere too? Olamide's a sensible girl, she'd never have come up with something this stupid on her own."

He came a few steps closer. Caroline could smell his nervous energy. It brought a fresh rush of nausea. Caroline tried to ignore both the sickness and her mounting annoyance. For Olamide's sake, she'd often had to resist the urge to tease Callum. Since the break-up, there'd been less reason to control herself and more provocation. Despite this, she decided to remain polite.

"Olamide's in the crypt," she said, following George's instructions to the letter and not paying any attention to how unlikely it sounded.

Her statement seemed to floor Callum for a moment. "The crypt? Why? Is she doing some research? I know she once considered writing a thesis on the architecture of Oxford."

"It's five am Callum. Don't you ever stop thinking about work? Maybe she just wanted a little adventure."

Callum stepped closer to her. "I hate you. Do you know that? I really hate you. All my life I've wanted to go to Oxford. I've wanted to get away from all the idiots and no-hopers I had to put up with in Birmingham. I wanted to learn without people mocking me. I wanted a girlfriend who'd like me for what I was, who'd love history as much as I do. For a few months, I thought I'd found my dream. The work was great, the tutors appreciated me, and Olamide was that perfect girl.

"You though, you never had to work for it. From the moment you were born, it was set in stone that you were coming to Oxford. You and everyone else at your overpriced school. And once you get here, do you make the most of this amazing opportunity, this chance that so many people would kill for? No. You do the bare minimum of work you can get away with.

You drink, you party, you do your plays, and you fuck your rower. Well fine. It's infuriating, but I can live with that. I can hide in my room, read my books and pretend that people like you don't exist. But you couldn't just be happy with your likeminded friends. You had to make Olamide like you. You had to ruin her."

Caroline stepped backwards, reeling from the force of his words. It was probably more than she'd ever heard Callum say in the entire year she'd known him, and it wasn't helping her headache. "Callum, calm down. It's not like that. I like my subject, I just like to have fun too. I've never made Olamide do anything bad, I've just encouraged her to come out once in a while, so she doesn't burn out."

Caroline's legs would barely support her. She leaned against a statue of some saint or other for support, and felt a weird tingling sensation, like touching an electric fence. Remembering the George's odd warning about the religious artifacts, she jerked away.

"You're a stuck up, stupid bitch who doesn't deserve to be at this university and doesn't deserve a friend like Olamide."

Caroline wanted to protest the incredibly unfair accusation, but she couldn't find the energy. Callum was too close and too loud, overwhelming her senses.

"The only person worse is Harriet. I guess you were brought up like that, so there's not much you can do about it. Deep down Harriet is a perfectly nice, very intelligent girl from an ordinary background, but she spends all her time doing her best to convince everyone she's some air-headed posh slut. I think all that repression is sending her mad. You should hear her talk about the Civil War or the Roman Empire. She acts like she was there."

"Callum, that's enough, please. I'm in no state for this." Caroline felt on the verge of tears, but knew, somehow that she had to keep going, had to persuade Callum to come into the crypt. "This isn't about me or Harriet or anyone else. You need to talk this over with Olamide, and she's right here in the crypt."

Callum shot her a look of pure hatred, but then nodded. "Fine, take me to her. But then I want you to leave us in peace whilst we talk."

Confused about what was going to happen when they got there, Caroline led the way. There was no sign of George. Callum visibly calmed when they entered the crypt.

"Wow, this is fascinating. I didn't know this existed, never mind that students could come down here. I wish I had my camera."

Then he caught sight of George's makeshift room. "Is that a bed? I don't understand. Where's Olamide?"

Caroline couldn't think how to answer, but before she had to, George reappeared. Callum looked at him with distaste, but unperturbed, George stepped in front of him, put his hands on his shoulder and looked deep into his eyes.

"Olamide will be here soon," he said matter-of-factly. "Now close your eyes."

Callum did so immediately. When he opened them again a moment later, Caroline saw his expression was glazed. Without further ado, George bit down into his neck. She stared, speechless. On some level, she knew she ought to be horrified, ought to be screaming. Instead, she was fascinated.

George lifted his head for a second. "Come here. This'll make you feel better, I promise."

Caroline walked to him. George held her head and guided it softly to the wound in Callum's neck. He held her down, but there was no need. She sucked at the wound with wild enthusiasm, not stopping to think about whether this was right or wrong, ignoring the tiny voice at the back of her mind screaming that her behaviour was disgusting. The blood was delicious, and it felt so right. Her headache receded, along with every pain in her body. She closed her eyes and revelled in the taste and the sensation. George relaxed his grip. Instead of holding her head forcibly, he stroked her hair like a lover. He was clearly enjoying her pleasure.

She wasn't sure how long she drank. Time blurred, and all that mattered was the taste of Callum's blood. Eventually, the blood slowed, and she had to suck harder and harder to get any more.

George lifted her head up and pried her hands free, letting the pale, bloodless body that had once been Callum drop to the ground. He turned her around and pulled her shaking body into him, holding her tightly.

"See, didn't I say I knew how to make you feel better? The tremors will fade in a moment. It's a bit like drinking too much coffee. But you're whole now. Nothing will make you ill again. All being well, you'll never die." He led her back to the bed.

"So I'm a vampire? And so are you?" Caroline was oddly unconcerned about this fact. The blood had soothed her, told her everything she needed to know.

"That pretty much sums it up. I'll explain everything later. But for now you need to sleep. It's almost dawn."

Caroline slipped back out of her dress. She touched her neck, pleased to see that the wound had disappeared. She didn't want to sleep. She felt strong and energised, ready for anything.

“So, are we going to sleep in the same bed?” She spoke slyly, no longer feeling afraid of George. “I guess I understand what you mean about Ben killing me now. I think I can forgive him, but I certainly don’t owe him anything.”

She watched George cast what appeared to be an approving eye over her body. “Sleep, yes. Nothing else, as much as I’d enjoy it. I saved you to get brownie points with a certain someone, and nothing undermines a person’s gratitude more than fucking their best friend.”

Caroline pouted. So he was still thinking about Harriet, even with her in front of him, in all her naked vampire glory. She’d see about that. Harriet had Tom, she didn’t need two perfect men. For now though, she was content to sleep. She climbed into bed, laying a few centimetres from George and struggling to resist the urge to roll over and touch him. Within moments, however, she felt a great sleepiness.

“The sun’s rising,” George whispered in his wonderful voice. “Go to sleep. It’s the ball tonight, and I need you to be on your best form.”

Caroline wanted to fight the feeling, wanted to ask George everything, but she only managed to resist for a few seconds before falling into a sleep deeper than she’d ever known before.

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