

Prologue – Trinity Term

The Cavaliers' Midsummer Party. Celebrate the lengthening of the nights with us. Dress like it's your last night on earth. 21st June. Be ready and we will be waiting.

When she found the invitation, Stephanie French stared at it for a few moments, utterly speechless. Then she punched the air. This was it. Until she got a proposal from an aristocrat (and she was working on that one), she'd reached the pinnacle of Oxford University social progress.

Despite her humble background, Stephanie had begun to feel almost blasé about her place in the in-crowd and each exclusive party. Nonetheless, she'd gasped at the sight of the tiny square of solid silver engraved with a heavily stylised sword and horse design.

Although she'd tried to find out, Stephanie still didn't know much about the Cavaliers, the most exclusive and secretive society in Oxford. She'd heard some rather alarming rumours about their summer parties, but was determined to do whatever was necessary to get ahead.

The party began the moment that the sun went down. Each guest was picked up from their college by an unordered taxi and driven out into the Oxfordshire countryside. One by one were deposited in a large clearing in the middle of a wood, several miles outside of the city. Stephanie was enchanted by the lanterns and flaming torches and impressed by the elaborate free bar with every drink that could be imagined. Music of all kinds drifted out from hidden speakers. To her astonishment, however, the space was dominated by a mock up of a scaffold, decorated in the Cavalier colours of silver and turquoise.

"I hear that's always there. Commemorating the execution of King Charles or something," Alice, another of the guests, whispered to Stephanie.

Stephanie nodded, trying to look interested in her socialite friend's ramblings, but her eyes were on Archie, who was standing on the other side of the clearing. The son of a Duke, he was surprisingly sweet and shy, and all the time that she'd been social climbing over the last year, she'd had him in her sights as the ultimate prize. At some point, however, she'd surprised herself by developing real feelings for the boy. Despite his aristocratic background,

Archie looked as though he felt as out of place as she did, apparently sober and staid amidst the drunken and drugged chaos.

Before she could reach him, the music suddenly stopped, and all the torches extinguished themselves. When they flickered back on, the Cavaliers were standing on the scaffold, champagne glasses in hand. They wore similar white tie outfits to the guests, but as full members, their waistcoats and bow ties were in the society colours, and many of them carried canes topped with a carving of the Cavaliers' sword and horse design.

"Welcome," said one of the members, a gorgeous tall boy with floppy white-blond hair and a finely sculpted, arrogant face. "I hope you've all been enjoying yourself in our absence. Now that we're here, the party's only going to get better."

Stephanie was intrigued to see the difference between the established members and the prospective ones. Everyone was exceptionally attractive but the actual members were notably more so. It was like looking at an airbrushed modelling shoot compared to a holiday snapshot.

"Becoming a Cavalier involves trading one life for a new and better one," intoned the blond boy. His voice was oddly hypnotic, and Stephanie couldn't take her eyes off him. "It involves power that you can't imagine. It involves acts that some would call evil but that we simply consider exhilarating. Allow me to introduce one of our most eminent old boys and begin the induction of the new members."

A man who appeared to be about forty but was still very attractive walked out of the woods behind the scaffold and joined the speaker on stage.

"Ladies, gentlemen and Cavaliers, please raise your glasses to Augustine." As everyone complied, the speaker passed the microphone to the newcomer.

"Thank you George," said Augustine.

If George's voice had been hypnotic, Stephanie realised, Augustine's was a thousand times more so. Nonetheless, she was sure that she had seen him before somewhere. Through her daze she desperately tried to remember where.

Augustine turned to face the candidates. He pointed at them, one by one, until five had been selected and lined up on the scaffold. Stephanie was delighted to see that Archie was one of the chosen few.

"Congratulations gentlemen," said Augustine. "Now please call your chosen guest to you."

The first selected candidate, a rower and College President named Peter, called for ‘Camilla Jenkins,’ and a brash brunette who had headed the fashion show committee walked up to him.

“Alice Howard-Jones,” said a socialite type called Charles. Her friend and sometimes rival, a sexy blonde South African who partied constantly and had a different eligible boyfriend every other week, sashayed onto the stage.

Next up was Edward Howard-Jones, Alice’s twin brother. He was as blond as his sister and tall and muscular. He was also notorious for being the leader of the gay scene in Oxford and was generally amiably camp, right until the point when he turned ruthless when an election needed fixing.

“Can I pick James?” he asked nervously.

Augustine nodded, and James, a failed candidate, walked over to join Edward.

Hugh, a well-built, charming, black guy who had been President of the Union the term before, picked a girl called Amelia.

Then finally, it was Archie’s turn. “Stephanie French,” he said quietly, not quite daring to meet her eye.

Stephanie went to him, almost overcome with delight. So far, they’d been keeping their burgeoning relationship quiet, but Archie could hardly have made his feelings more public than by picking her out of this group of beautiful and talented women, in front of the most important crowd in the university.

George, standing behind Archie, glanced at Stephanie questioningly. “French was it?” he asked quietly enough that only she and Archie could hear. “Are you any relation to Adelaide? I’ve been trying to think who you reminded me of all night.”

Stephanie had felt that nothing could ruin the moment, but his words filled her with a sense of unease.

“I had an aunt called Adelaide,” she whispered. “But she died when I was a baby, you couldn’t have known her.”

George smiled. “How fascinating. Isn’t it strange how things turn out?”

Before she could reply, Augustine called for silence and stepped to the front of the scaffolding again.

“Now it begins,” he proclaimed in his hypnotic voice. “What follows is a necessity. I ask you all to remain calm.”

He raised his cane before slamming it down on the floor. The Cavaliers, as one man, leant forward and sank their teeth into the necks of the inductees. Oddly, no one screamed.

Stephanie could only manage one coherent thought – that aristocrats don't have blue blood after all. And then everything went dark.

When Stephanie came around, the inductees were sitting at a table and sipping champagne. The difference that she had noticed between the existing Cavaliers and the new recruits had disappeared. The inductees were terribly pale, but otherwise their good points were emphasised, and their minor flaws had disappeared. Like the existing members, they looked as though they had only just left the house – not a hair out of place, not a single wrinkle on their shirts or hint of sweat.

The failed candidates appeared to have undergone a similar transformation, but they were unconscious and staked to the ground.

“They'll die in the morning when the sun rises,” she heard an existing member explain to a new recruit. “It's a shame really, but we can't have failures hanging around and they know too much to just wipe their memories.”

“The girls seem to have woken up,” one member interrupted casually.

“Perfect timing,” said George. “Gentlemen, I'm sure you're all still feeling a little frail and confused. Being dead for a while will do that to you. But go and find your partner and you'll soon be feeling much better.”

As George and Archie came towards her, Stephanie knew she ought to run, but her mind and body felt as though they'd become entirely separated.

“As a rule we aren't sadists and don't take more blood than we need,” Augustine intoned. “We try to avoid death and pain whilst still feeding our needs and urges. But to complete the transformation, we drink to the death.”

On cue, each of the old members leant forward and bit the selected girls. It didn't hurt as George's teeth sunk into Stephanie's neck. In fact, it felt almost pleasant. After a few seconds, once the blood was flowing easily, he stood back and guided Archie's head to her wounds.

Archie held back. “I can't,” he whispered.

“Don't be ridiculous,” hissed George. “If you don't drink now you'll die. Really die. You must have known what you were letting yourself in for.”

“Fine, I'll die,” he replied in a shaky voice.

George shook his head and holding Archie in something resembling a headlock forced his mouth onto the gash in Stephanie's neck. For a moment, Archie resisted, but then some survival instinct kicked in, and he began to drink. Stephanie snapped out of whatever strange hypnotic state she had been in. Pain and terror hit her, and she began to scream and attempt to fight Archie off. The other girls were still standing there placidly, making no attempt to resist their partners' attacks, clearly mesmerised. All the Cavaliers turned to look at her.

"George, put her under, for goodness sake," said Augustine, calmly, but with a clear note of surprise.

As Archie continued to drink, seemingly oblivious to her screams and certainly resistant to her attempts to drag him off, George put his hand on her shoulder.

"Look at me Stephanie," he whispered. "Just relax."

Stephanie could feel her mind and body trying to respond, but the pain and fear stopped her from giving in.

"She's resisting," George shouted, sounding alarmed.

Augustine walked over, put a hand on her head and stared at her, clearly confused. "For a moment there I almost thought you were someone else. Especially considering that you seem able to resist George's mind control. That's most unusual."

Stephanie wanted to plead with him to save her, but his expression quickly hardened.

"It's obviously just a strange coincidence, and I can't go around being overly sentimental. You won't get away, so at least let me make it painless for you."

Listening to his words, she found herself no longer able to move or even to scream. She watched Archie continue to suck at her neck. George held his head in place, presumably in case he was tempted to change his mind. As she began to pass out of consciousness, she finally remembered where she'd seen Augustine before. Not in Oxford, or even London, but back in her hometown years ago, at her cousin Harriet's birthday party when they'd both been kids.

And then Stephanie died.

