

Excerpts: A Rake's Rebellion

Lord Barclay—Brice to his friends—groaned and pulled the pillow over his head to alleviate the bright light from the window of his guest room in Brighton Pavilion. Some damn fool had opened the curtains. He didn't need rays of sunshine piercing his already hammering head. What kind of rot-gut whiskey had the prince-regent been passing off at last night's ball?

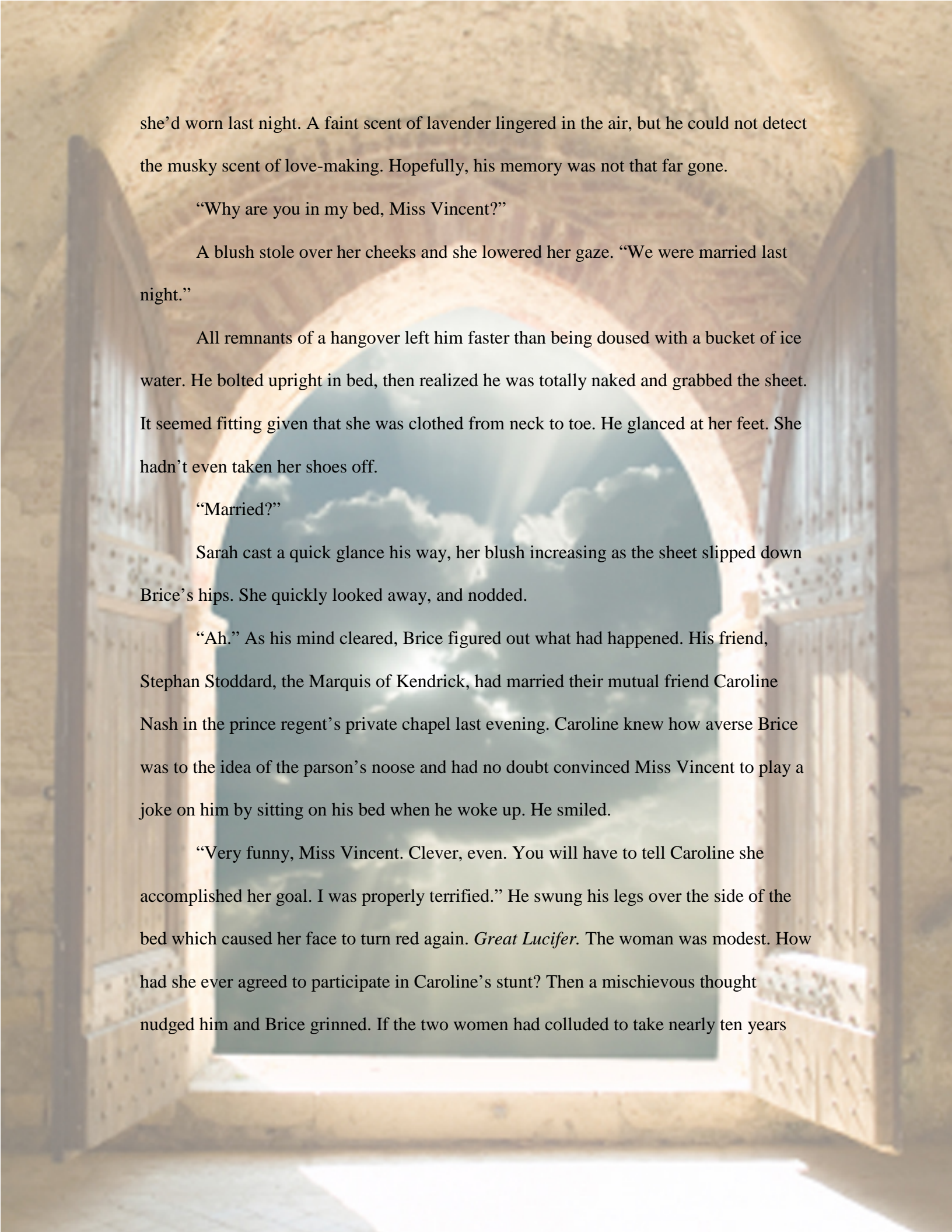
Brice stirred, squeezing his eyes shut when his pillow slipped off his face, and gingerly moved his legs and feet, which seemed heavy as lead. He slowly stretched his arms, flexing his fingers to make sure everything was intact and he felt something soft. Soft and feminine. *Umm*. At least last night hadn't been a complete loss if he had a woman in his bed. He smiled as he rolled over. He just wished he could remember...

"I would rather you not touch me, your lordship."

Not *touch* her? Hell. *What have I done?* Brice forced his eyes open, squinting against the offending sunlight streaming in, then quickly closed them again. His mind was obviously still in hazy oblivion. How foxed had he gotten last night?

Sarah Vincent, the poor American cousin of the Earl of Lockwood, was sitting on his bed. Of all the women his alcohol-infused brain could have conjured, why did it have to pick someone who'd been raised in a convent, prim and proper, and even dressed the part?

Brice opened one eye half-way. She was still there, propped against his headboard, fully clothed in the drab brown dress, with its high collar and long sleeves, that



she'd worn last night. A faint scent of lavender lingered in the air, but he could not detect the musky scent of love-making. Hopefully, his memory was not that far gone.

“Why are you in my bed, Miss Vincent?”

A blush stole over her cheeks and she lowered her gaze. “We were married last night.”

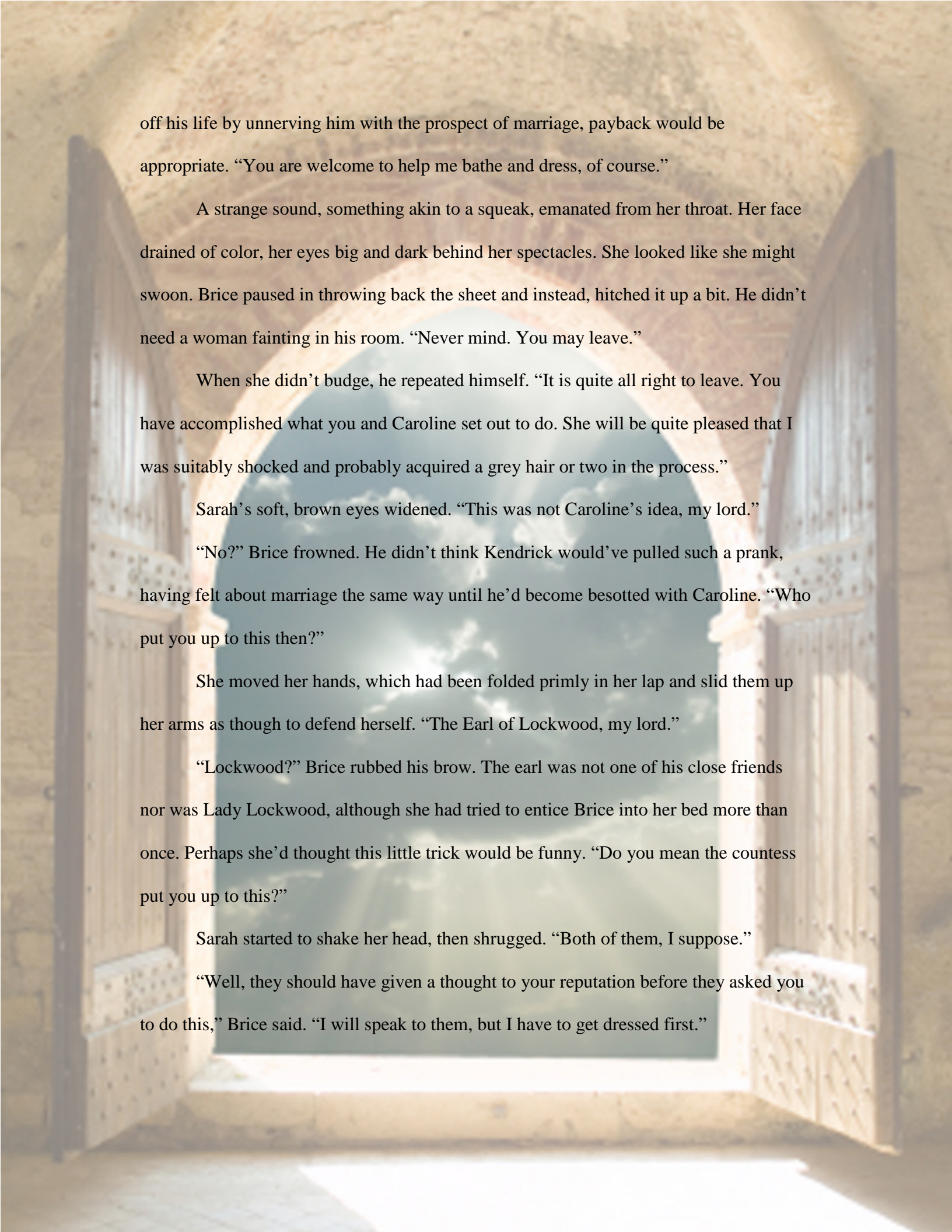
All remnants of a hangover left him faster than being doused with a bucket of ice water. He bolted upright in bed, then realized he was totally naked and grabbed the sheet. It seemed fitting given that she was clothed from neck to toe. He glanced at her feet. She hadn't even taken her shoes off.

“Married?”

Sarah cast a quick glance his way, her blush increasing as the sheet slipped down Brice's hips. She quickly looked away, and nodded.

“Ah.” As his mind cleared, Brice figured out what had happened. His friend, Stephan Stoddard, the Marquis of Kendrick, had married their mutual friend Caroline Nash in the prince regent's private chapel last evening. Caroline knew how averse Brice was to the idea of the parson's noose and had no doubt convinced Miss Vincent to play a joke on him by sitting on his bed when he woke up. He smiled.

“Very funny, Miss Vincent. Clever, even. You will have to tell Caroline she accomplished her goal. I was properly terrified.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed which caused her face to turn red again. *Great Lucifer.* The woman was modest. How had she ever agreed to participate in Caroline's stunt? Then a mischievous thought nudged him and Brice grinned. If the two women had colluded to take nearly ten years



off his life by unnerving him with the prospect of marriage, payback would be appropriate. “You are welcome to help me bathe and dress, of course.”

A strange sound, something akin to a squeak, emanated from her throat. Her face drained of color, her eyes big and dark behind her spectacles. She looked like she might swoon. Brice paused in throwing back the sheet and instead, hitched it up a bit. He didn’t need a woman fainting in his room. “Never mind. You may leave.”

When she didn’t budge, he repeated himself. “It is quite all right to leave. You have accomplished what you and Caroline set out to do. She will be quite pleased that I was suitably shocked and probably acquired a grey hair or two in the process.”

Sarah’s soft, brown eyes widened. “This was not Caroline’s idea, my lord.”

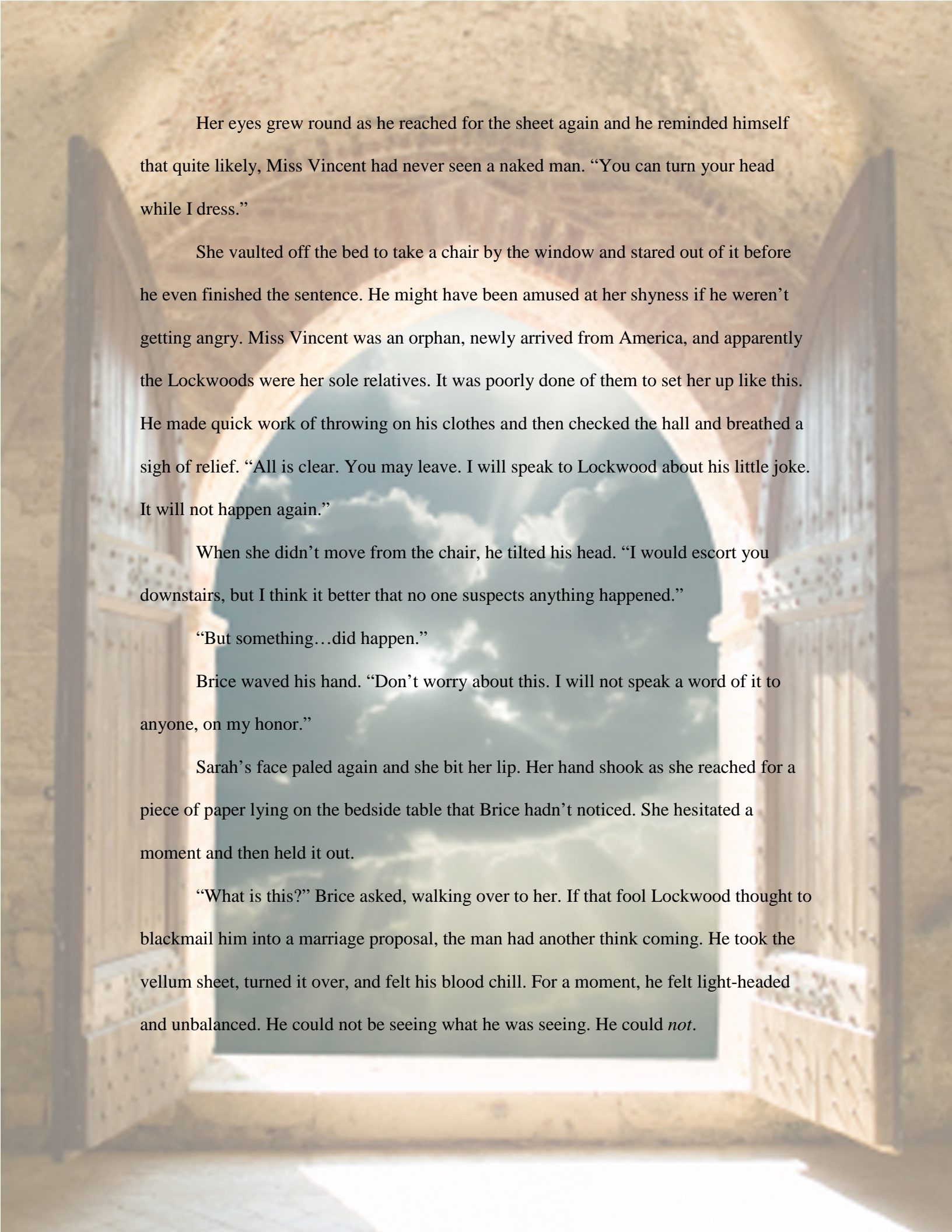
“No?” Brice frowned. He didn’t think Kendrick would’ve pulled such a prank, having felt about marriage the same way until he’d become besotted with Caroline. “Who put you up to this then?”

She moved her hands, which had been folded primly in her lap and slid them up her arms as though to defend herself. “The Earl of Lockwood, my lord.”

“Lockwood?” Brice rubbed his brow. The earl was not one of his close friends nor was Lady Lockwood, although she had tried to entice Brice into her bed more than once. Perhaps she’d thought this little trick would be funny. “Do you mean the countess put you up to this?”

Sarah started to shake her head, then shrugged. “Both of them, I suppose.”

“Well, they should have given a thought to your reputation before they asked you to do this,” Brice said. “I will speak to them, but I have to get dressed first.”



Her eyes grew round as he reached for the sheet again and he reminded himself that quite likely, Miss Vincent had never seen a naked man. “You can turn your head while I dress.”

She vaulted off the bed to take a chair by the window and stared out of it before he even finished the sentence. He might have been amused at her shyness if he weren’t getting angry. Miss Vincent was an orphan, newly arrived from America, and apparently the Lockwoods were her sole relatives. It was poorly done of them to set her up like this. He made quick work of throwing on his clothes and then checked the hall and breathed a sigh of relief. “All is clear. You may leave. I will speak to Lockwood about his little joke. It will not happen again.”

When she didn’t move from the chair, he tilted his head. “I would escort you downstairs, but I think it better that no one suspects anything happened.”

“But something...did happen.”

Brice waved his hand. “Don’t worry about this. I will not speak a word of it to anyone, on my honor.”

Sarah’s face paled again and she bit her lip. Her hand shook as she reached for a piece of paper lying on the bedside table that Brice hadn’t noticed. She hesitated a moment and then held it out.

“What is this?” Brice asked, walking over to her. If that fool Lockwood thought to blackmail him into a marriage proposal, the man had another think coming. He took the vellum sheet, turned it over, and felt his blood chill. For a moment, he felt light-headed and unbalanced. He could not be seeing what he was seeing. He could *not*.

“It is a marriage certificate, my lord.” Sarah said in a small voice. “We were truly married last night.”

