

Excerpt: A Rake's Revenge

The carriage coming to a stop made her eyes snap open. Had she dozed off? Caroline heard muffled voices and then a scuffling sound. She leaned forward, but before she could look out the window, both doors opened. An arm and hand holding a large musket shoved through the left side and Caroline scuttled to the right, tripping since the step hadn't been let down, and toppled into the arms of the man outside.

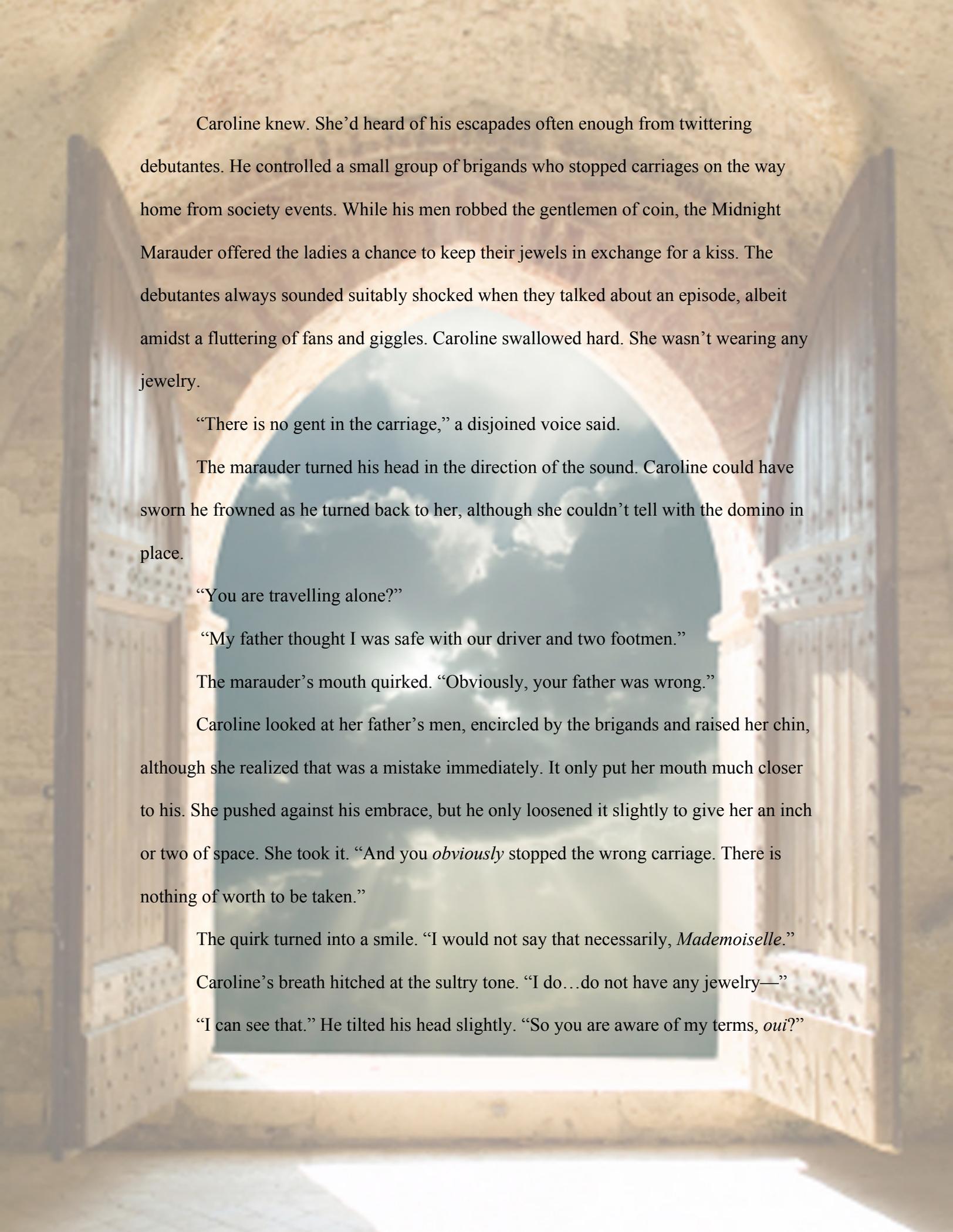
Arms that felt like bands of steel as they encircled her waist. Caroline pressed her hands flat against the man's chest—it felt like steel too—and tried to push away. She might as well have been trying to move a stone wall. She looked up and barely managed to suppress a gasp. The man sported a Vandyke and his face was masked, but in the dim light from a lamppost down the street, she could discern the glitter of dark eyes almost as black as his hair and the rest of the clothing he wore, including a black cape. Her knees suddenly jellied. Had his hands not been holding her up, Caroline might have simply slid to the ground and she wasn't given to swooning.

But God in heaven. She was looking at the Midnight Marauder.

He certainly didn't need an introduction, not that being formally introduced was necessary when attempting a robbery. But then, Caroline's mind wasn't functioning fully since she was held so close she could feel his body heat.

As if realizing that she recognized him, or at least who his moniker was, a corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

"You know why I am here?" he asked, his voice a husky baritone.



Caroline knew. She'd heard of his escapades often enough from twittering debutantes. He controlled a small group of brigands who stopped carriages on the way home from society events. While his men robbed the gentlemen of coin, the Midnight Marauder offered the ladies a chance to keep their jewels in exchange for a kiss. The debutantes always sounded suitably shocked when they talked about an episode, albeit amidst a fluttering of fans and giggles. Caroline swallowed hard. She wasn't wearing any jewelry.

"There is no gent in the carriage," a disjointed voice said.

The marauder turned his head in the direction of the sound. Caroline could have sworn he frowned as he turned back to her, although she couldn't tell with the domino in place.

"You are travelling alone?"

"My father thought I was safe with our driver and two footmen."

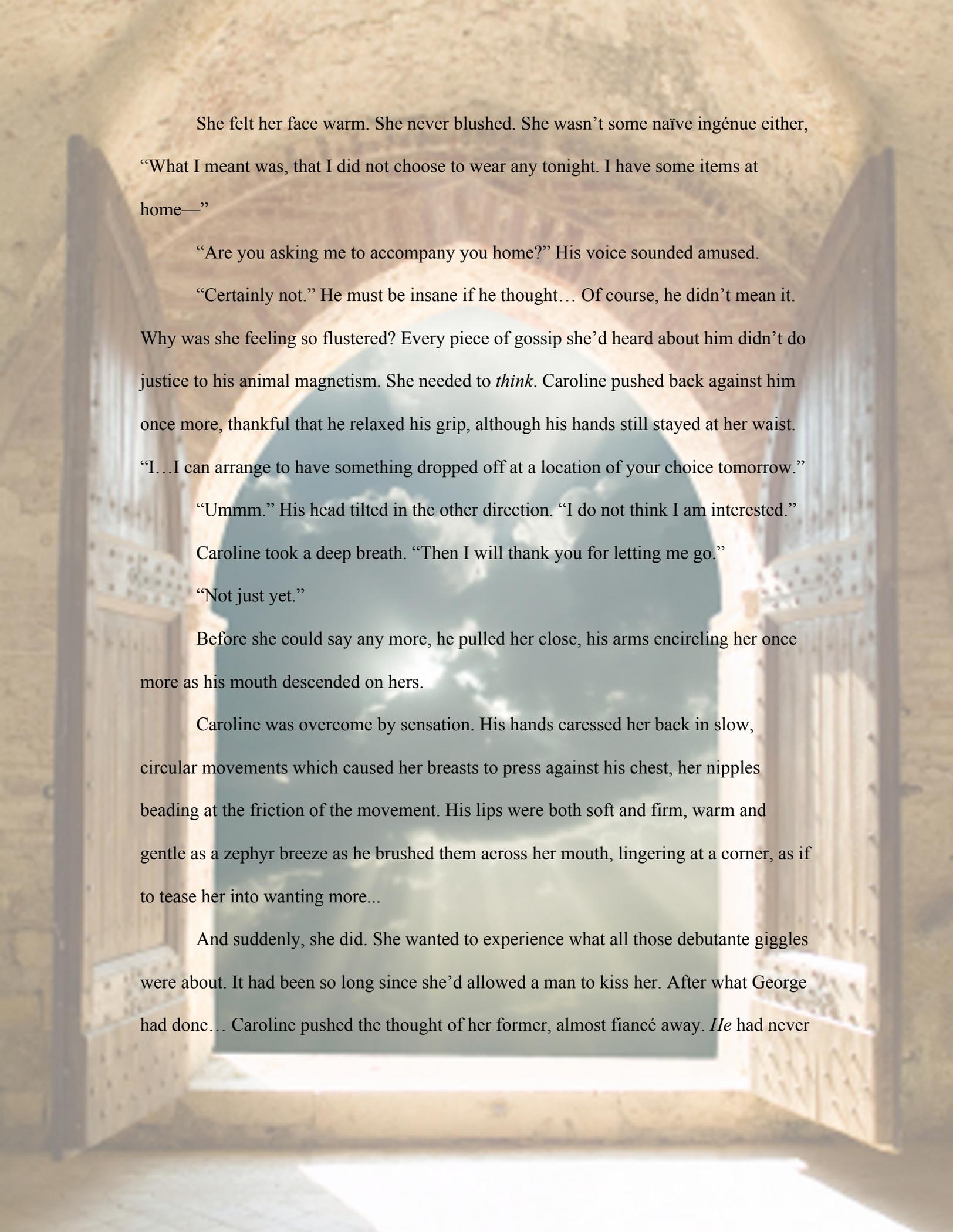
The marauder's mouth quirked. "Obviously, your father was wrong."

Caroline looked at her father's men, encircled by the brigands and raised her chin, although she realized that was a mistake immediately. It only put her mouth much closer to his. She pushed against his embrace, but he only loosened it slightly to give her an inch or two of space. She took it. "And you *obviously* stopped the wrong carriage. There is nothing of worth to be taken."

The quirk turned into a smile. "I would not say that necessarily, *Mademoiselle*."

Caroline's breath hitched at the sultry tone. "I do...do not have any jewelry—"

"I can see that." He tilted his head slightly. "So you are aware of my terms, *oui*?"



She felt her face warm. She never blushed. She wasn't some naïve ingénue either, "What I meant was, that I did not choose to wear any tonight. I have some items at home—"

"Are you asking me to accompany you home?" His voice sounded amused.

"Certainly not." He must be insane if he thought... Of course, he didn't mean it. Why was she feeling so flustered? Every piece of gossip she'd heard about him didn't do justice to his animal magnetism. She needed to *think*. Caroline pushed back against him once more, thankful that he relaxed his grip, although his hands still stayed at her waist. "I...I can arrange to have something dropped off at a location of your choice tomorrow."

"Ummm." His head tilted in the other direction. "I do not think I am interested."

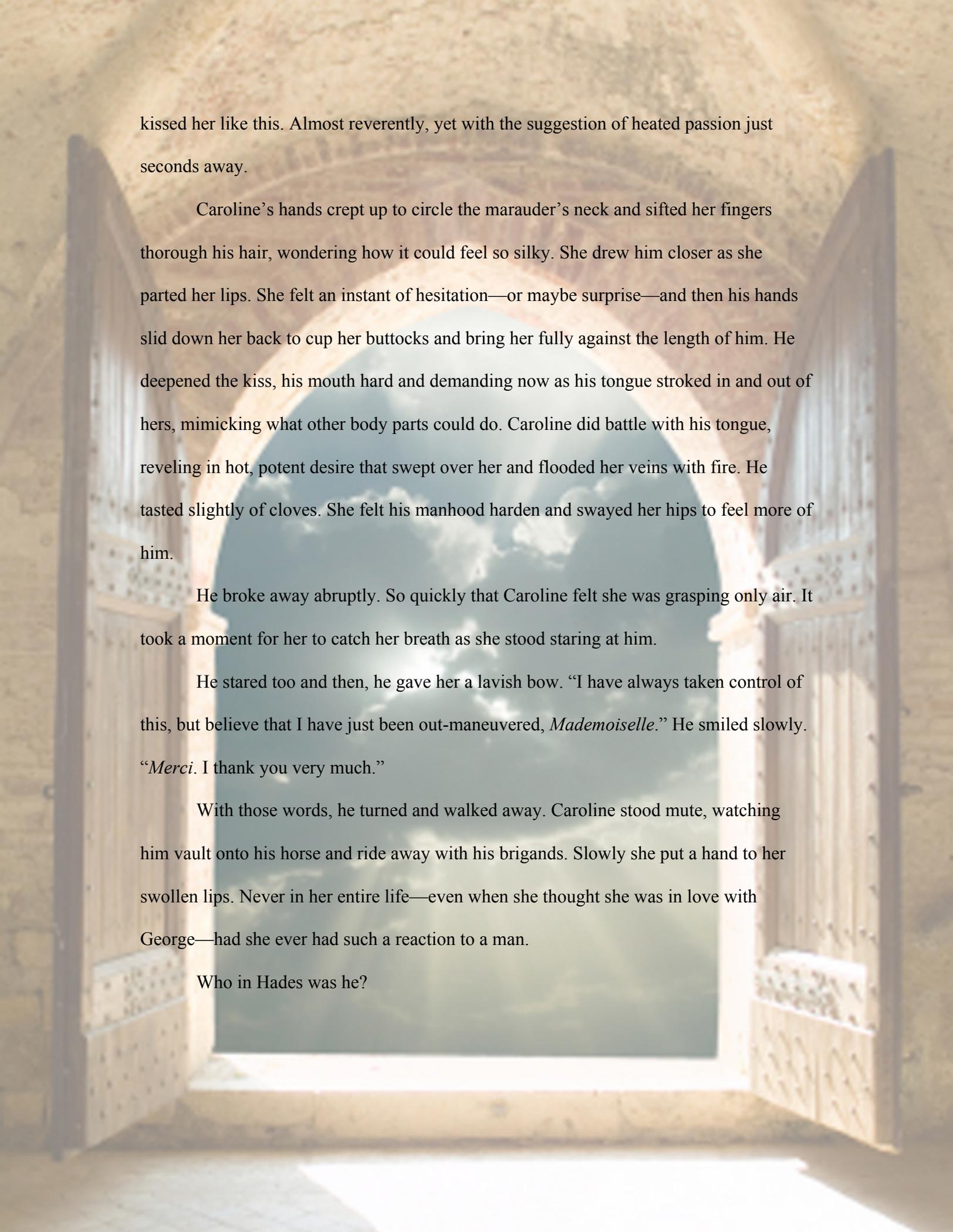
Caroline took a deep breath. "Then I will thank you for letting me go."

"Not just yet."

Before she could say any more, he pulled her close, his arms encircling her once more as his mouth descended on hers.

Caroline was overcome by sensation. His hands caressed her back in slow, circular movements which caused her breasts to press against his chest, her nipples beading at the friction of the movement. His lips were both soft and firm, warm and gentle as a zephyr breeze as he brushed them across her mouth, lingering at a corner, as if to tease her into wanting more...

And suddenly, she did. She wanted to experience what all those debutante giggles were about. It had been so long since she'd allowed a man to kiss her. After what George had done... Caroline pushed the thought of her former, almost fiancé away. *He* had never



kissed her like this. Almost reverently, yet with the suggestion of heated passion just seconds away.

Caroline's hands crept up to circle the marauder's neck and sifted her fingers thorough his hair, wondering how it could feel so silky. She drew him closer as she parted her lips. She felt an instant of hesitation—or maybe surprise—and then his hands slid down her back to cup her buttocks and bring her fully against the length of him. He deepened the kiss, his mouth hard and demanding now as his tongue stroked in and out of hers, mimicking what other body parts could do. Caroline did battle with his tongue, reveling in hot, potent desire that swept over her and flooded her veins with fire. He tasted slightly of cloves. She felt his manhood harden and swayed her hips to feel more of him.

He broke away abruptly. So quickly that Caroline felt she was grasping only air. It took a moment for her to catch her breath as she stood staring at him.

He stared too and then, he gave her a lavish bow. "I have always taken control of this, but believe that I have just been out-maneuvered, *Mademoiselle*." He smiled slowly. "*Merci*. I thank you very much."

With those words, he turned and walked away. Caroline stood mute, watching him vault onto his horse and ride away with his brigands. Slowly she put a hand to her swollen lips. Never in her entire life—even when she thought she was in love with George—had she ever had such a reaction to a man.

Who in Hades was he?