

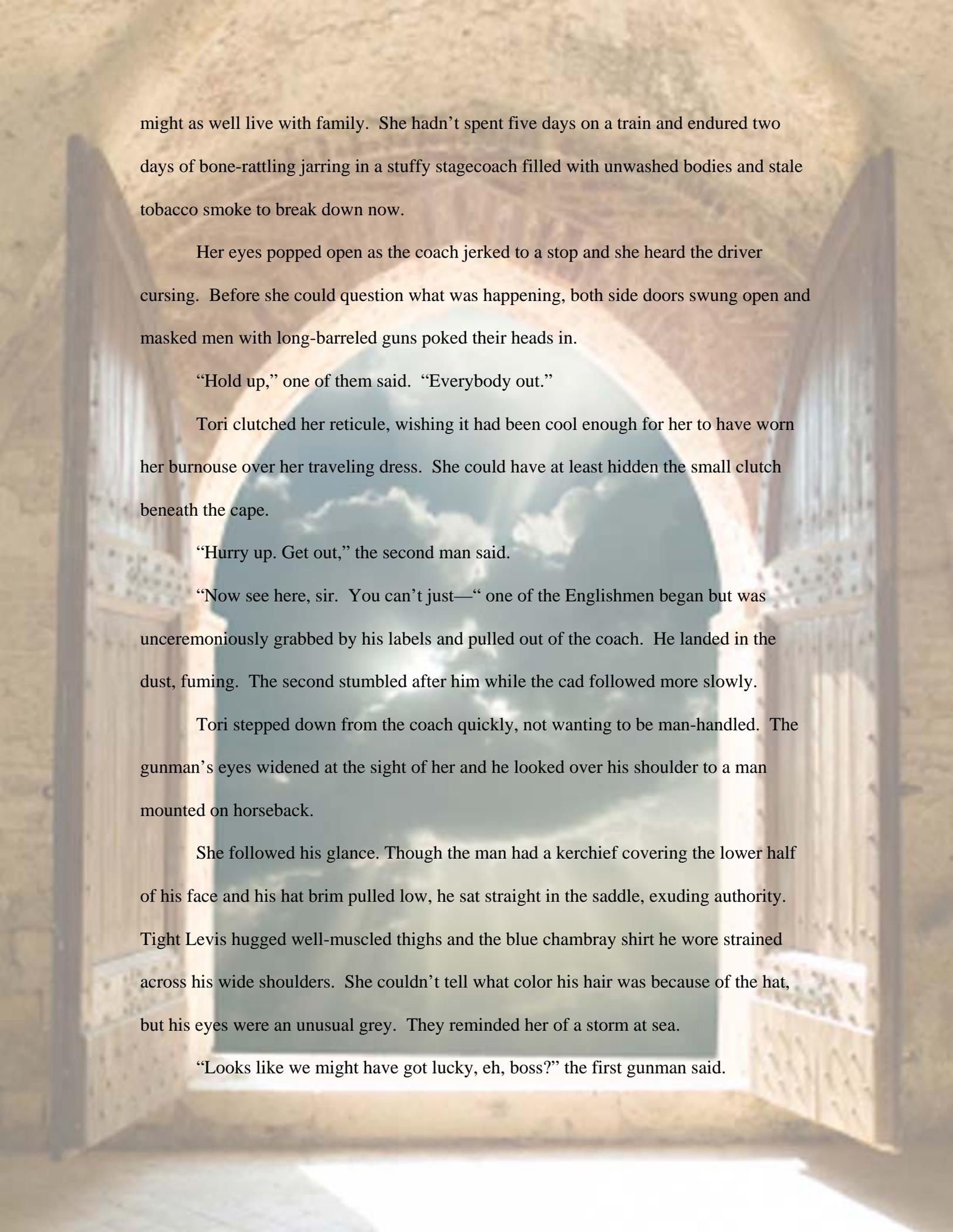
Excerpt: Blue Skies Over Texas

Victoria “Tori” Caldwell clutched the swing strap attached to the side of the coach as the Concord jostled its way over the rutted trail that the stage driver called a road. How she would have loved to take off the velvet bonnet that had been so fashionable in New York, but dampened her auburn curls in the stifling South Texas heat. It simply wasn’t proper, and the ill-mannered cad that sat across from her had already winked lewdly once. If it hadn’t been for the two English gentlemen sitting beside him, heaven only knows what would have happened.

She closed her eyes, trying to keep the tears that were burning beneath her eyelids from falling. It was her fault the lecher was eyeing her so. She should have a chaperone. Her aunt sent enough money for her to hire a companion, but after seeing to proper funeral for her mother, she only had enough left for her own ticket.

Tori squeezed her eyes tighter. Enough tears had been spilled over the freakish carriage accident that had killed her father earlier that year. The shock of finding out he had accumulated huge gambling debts—and the secondary scandal that he had doctored the books at his place of employment to cover them—had been too much for her mother’s frail constitution. Forced to sell their townhouse, she had simply retired to her bedroom one evening and Tori found her there the next morning, an empty bottle of laudanum on the bedstand.

Taking a deep breath, Tori squared her shoulders. Texas was her future. Even though the horror stories of its lawlessness frightened her, it was where her only relatives lived. She was twenty-two and probably on the way to spinsterhood since she had yet to meet a man who even remotely excited her like the heroes in the dime novels did. She



might as well live with family. She hadn't spent five days on a train and endured two days of bone-rattling jarring in a stuffy stagecoach filled with unwashed bodies and stale tobacco smoke to break down now.

Her eyes popped open as the coach jerked to a stop and she heard the driver cursing. Before she could question what was happening, both side doors swung open and masked men with long-barreled guns poked their heads in.

"Hold up," one of them said. "Everybody out."

Tori clutched her reticule, wishing it had been cool enough for her to have worn her burnouse over her traveling dress. She could have at least hidden the small clutch beneath the cape.

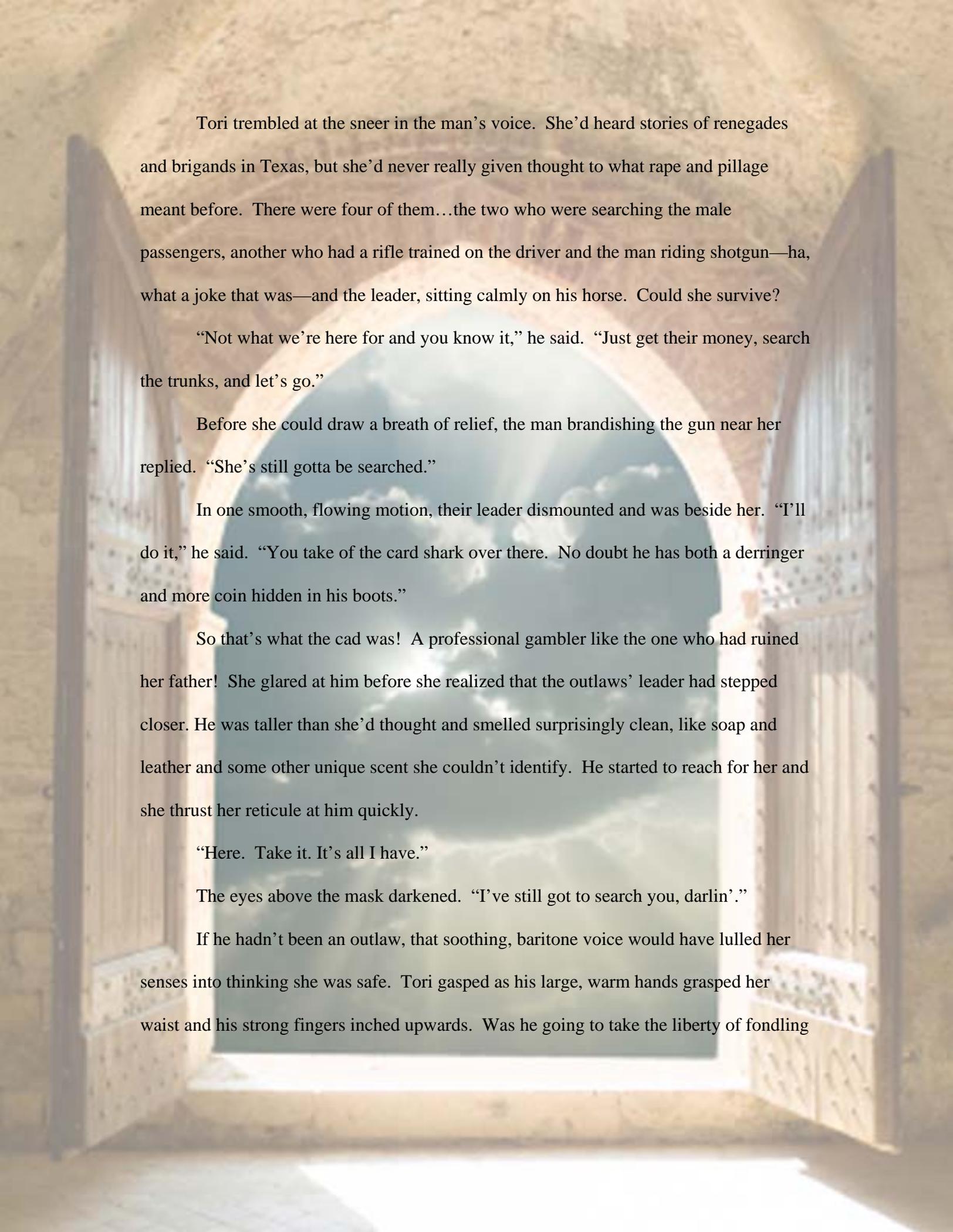
"Hurry up. Get out," the second man said.

"Now see here, sir. You can't just—" one of the Englishmen began but was unceremoniously grabbed by his labels and pulled out of the coach. He landed in the dust, fuming. The second stumbled after him while the cad followed more slowly.

Tori stepped down from the coach quickly, not wanting to be man-handled. The gunman's eyes widened at the sight of her and he looked over his shoulder to a man mounted on horseback.

She followed his glance. Though the man had a kerchief covering the lower half of his face and his hat brim pulled low, he sat straight in the saddle, exuding authority. Tight Levis hugged well-muscled thighs and the blue chambray shirt he wore strained across his wide shoulders. She couldn't tell what color his hair was because of the hat, but his eyes were an unusual grey. They reminded her of a storm at sea.

"Looks like we might have got lucky, eh, boss?" the first gunman said.



Tori trembled at the sneer in the man's voice. She'd heard stories of renegades and brigands in Texas, but she'd never really given thought to what rape and pillage meant before. There were four of them...the two who were searching the male passengers, another who had a rifle trained on the driver and the man riding shotgun—ha, what a joke that was—and the leader, sitting calmly on his horse. Could she survive?

“Not what we're here for and you know it,” he said. “Just get their money, search the trunks, and let's go.”

Before she could draw a breath of relief, the man brandishing the gun near her replied. “She's still gotta be searched.”

In one smooth, flowing motion, their leader dismounted and was beside her. “I'll do it,” he said. “You take of the card shark over there. No doubt he has both a derringer and more coin hidden in his boots.”

So that's what the cad was! A professional gambler like the one who had ruined her father! She glared at him before she realized that the outlaws' leader had stepped closer. He was taller than she'd thought and smelled surprisingly clean, like soap and leather and some other unique scent she couldn't identify. He started to reach for her and she thrust her reticule at him quickly.

“Here. Take it. It's all I have.”

The eyes above the mask darkened. “I've still got to search you, darlin'.”

If he hadn't been an outlaw, that soothing, baritone voice would have lulled her senses into thinking she was safe. Tori gasped as his large, warm hands grasped her waist and his strong fingers inched upwards. Was he going to take the liberty of fondling

her breasts? In spite of the situation, she felt her nipples harden and strain against the soft muslin fabric of her bodice.

“No corset. Smart lady,” he murmured as his thumbs grazed the underside of each breast. His arms circled around her and he ran his hands along her back and then over her hips and down her thighs.

Good Lord, he made her skin tingle! It must be fear of the situation that was making her react so! But then, no man had ever touched her so intimately before. She gasped again as he bent and lifted her skirt slightly. She brushed frantically at the front of the dress, hoping to keep it down. “Please don’t. I beg you.”

He looked up, his eyes slate. “You don’t need to be afraid. I’m just making sure you don’t have a parlor gun or knife strapped to your legs.”

She shivered as his hands ran over her silk stockings. It almost felt like a caress. Doubtless this heat had addled her brains. She batted at her skirt again. “I don’t have a weapon on me anywhere.”

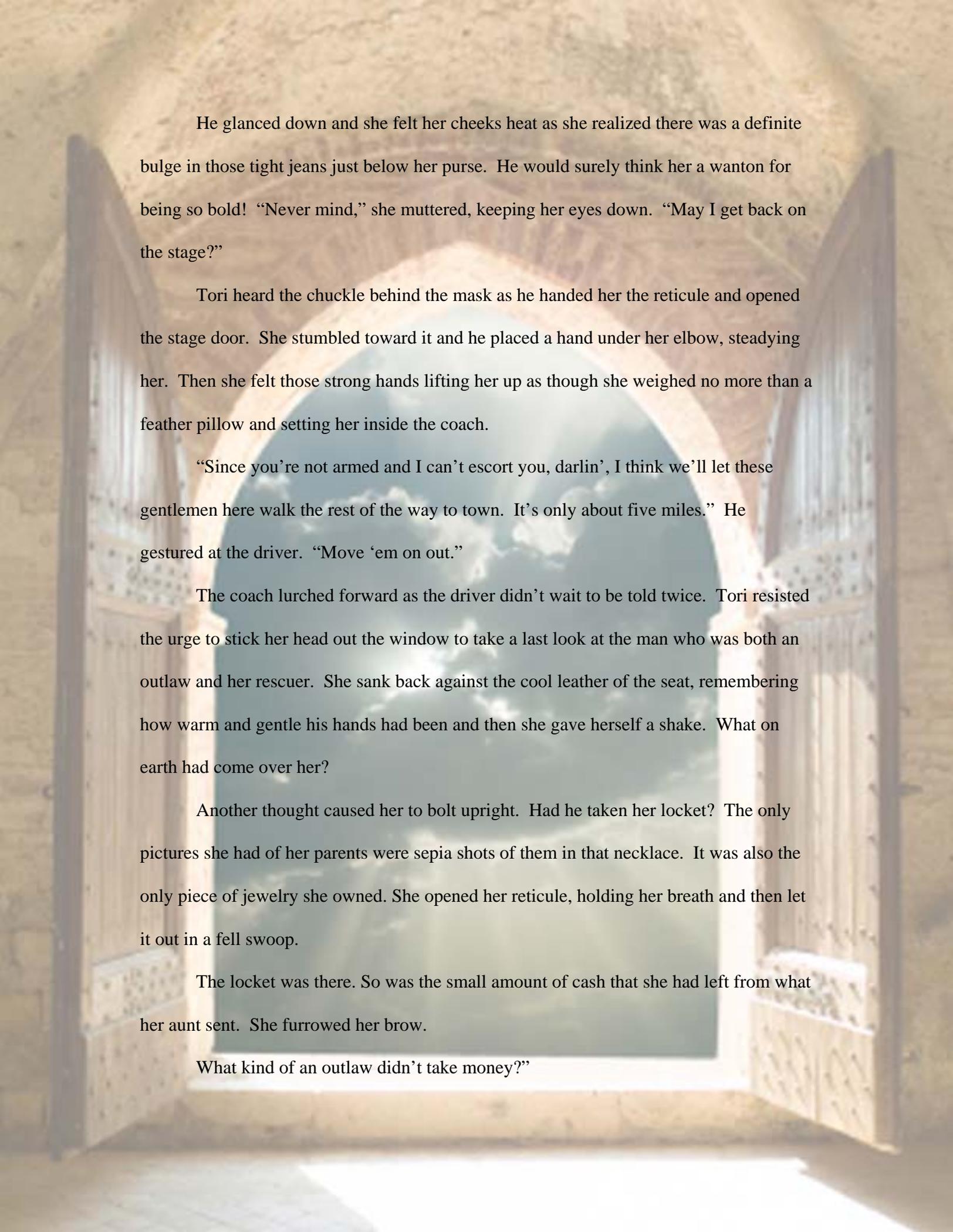
Frowning, he straightened. “You should. Why are you traveling without a chaperone? Didn’t anyone tell you it isn’t safe?”

Tori stared at him, hysterical laughter beginning to bubble in her throat. An *outlaw* was warning her it wasn’t safe out here? She really needed to find some shade before she started having delusions that this was a Sunday picnic.

“Well?” the man asked.

“I couldn’t afford to hire a companion. It really isn’t a story I want to talk about.”

She eyed the reticule dangling from where he had stuck it in his belt. “If you’ll take the money and be so kind as to give that back to me, I’d appreciate it.”



He glanced down and she felt her cheeks heat as she realized there was a definite bulge in those tight jeans just below her purse. He would surely think her a wanton for being so bold! “Never mind,” she muttered, keeping her eyes down. “May I get back on the stage?”

Tori heard the chuckle behind the mask as he handed her the reticule and opened the stage door. She stumbled toward it and he placed a hand under her elbow, steadying her. Then she felt those strong hands lifting her up as though she weighed no more than a feather pillow and setting her inside the coach.

“Since you’re not armed and I can’t escort you, darlin’, I think we’ll let these gentlemen here walk the rest of the way to town. It’s only about five miles.” He gestured at the driver. “Move ‘em on out.”

The coach lurched forward as the driver didn’t wait to be told twice. Tori resisted the urge to stick her head out the window to take a last look at the man who was both an outlaw and her rescuer. She sank back against the cool leather of the seat, remembering how warm and gentle his hands had been and then she gave herself a shake. What on earth had come over her?

Another thought caused her to bolt upright. Had he taken her locket? The only pictures she had of her parents were sepia shots of them in that necklace. It was also the only piece of jewelry she owned. She opened her reticule, holding her breath and then let it out in a fell swoop.

The locket was there. So was the small amount of cash that she had left from what her aunt sent. She furrowed her brow.

What kind of an outlaw didn’t take money?”