

Excerpt: Gunslinger

San Francisco, 1869

Abigail Clayton stepped onto the Long Wharf platform and brushed flecks of cinder off the shoulder of her pelisse as she tried not to choke on the sooty smoke spewing from the locomotive's stack.

Criminy. The train journey from New York had been an exhausting eight days even though the conductors bragged about the speed of the latest engine. Her bones had been rattled by the clanking of iron wheels on metal tracks, her teeth practically jarred loose, and every muscle ached. All Abby wanted was a hot bath and a real bed instead of a hard bench for a berth.

But first, she needed to find her husband... if only she knew what he looked like.

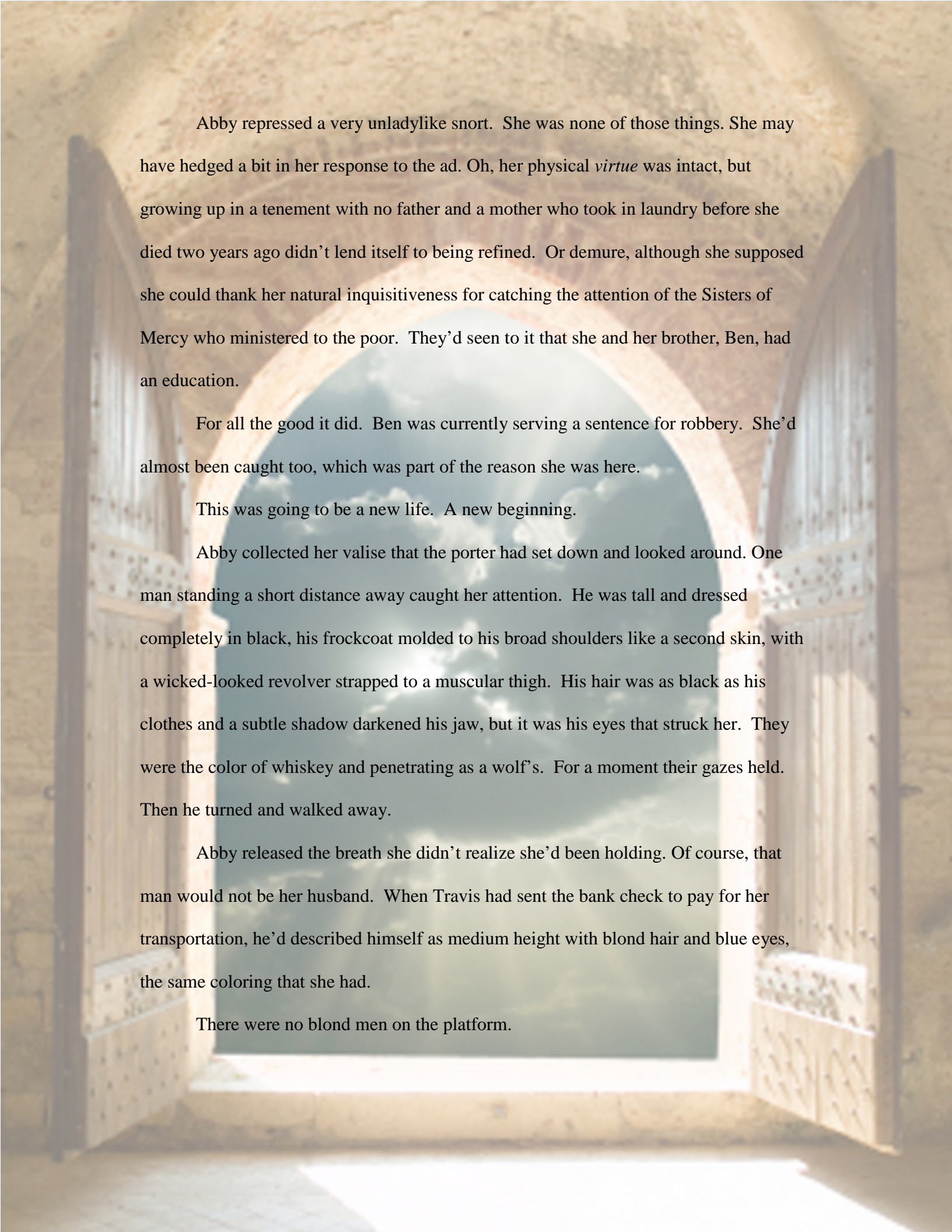
Opening her reticule, she took out two pieces of paper and carefully unfolded them. The one was her marriage-by-proxy which had been quickly signed by a magistrate in the Bowery with two strangers for witnesses. The other was the reply she'd received when she answered an ad for a mail-order bride to come West.

My dearest Miss Clayton,

I hope I may call you 'my dearest' since I pray that you will do me the honor of becoming my wife. Although I am quite the successful entrepreneur—I own a general store that profits nicely from both miners and the local population—I find that I am quite lonely. Virtuous, demure, and refined young ladies are in short supply here. I am sure we will suit quite nicely. I look forward to greeting you at the train station.

Your future grateful companion forever,

Travis Sayer



Abby repressed a very unladylike snort. She was none of those things. She may have hedged a bit in her response to the ad. Oh, her physical *virtue* was intact, but growing up in a tenement with no father and a mother who took in laundry before she died two years ago didn't lend itself to being refined. Or demure, although she supposed she could thank her natural inquisitiveness for catching the attention of the Sisters of Mercy who ministered to the poor. They'd seen to it that she and her brother, Ben, had an education.

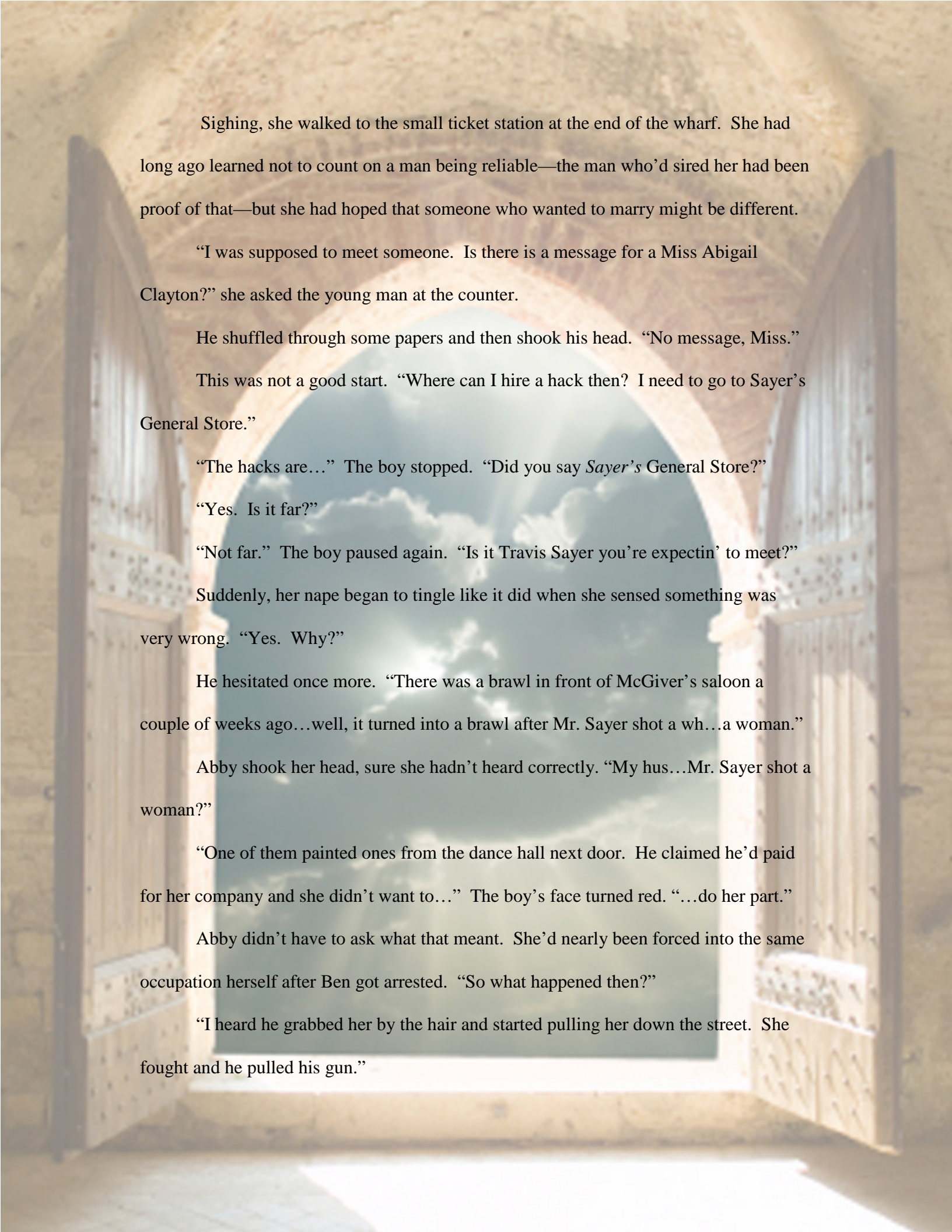
For all the good it did. Ben was currently serving a sentence for robbery. She'd almost been caught too, which was part of the reason she was here.

This was going to be a new life. A new beginning.

Abby collected her valise that the porter had set down and looked around. One man standing a short distance away caught her attention. He was tall and dressed completely in black, his frockcoat molded to his broad shoulders like a second skin, with a wicked-looking revolver strapped to a muscular thigh. His hair was as black as his clothes and a subtle shadow darkened his jaw, but it was his eyes that struck her. They were the color of whiskey and penetrating as a wolf's. For a moment their gazes held. Then he turned and walked away.

Abby released the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. Of course, that man would not be her husband. When Travis had sent the bank check to pay for her transportation, he'd described himself as medium height with blond hair and blue eyes, the same coloring that she had.

There were no blond men on the platform.



Sighing, she walked to the small ticket station at the end of the wharf. She had long ago learned not to count on a man being reliable—the man who’d sired her had been proof of that—but she had hoped that someone who wanted to marry might be different.

“I was supposed to meet someone. Is there is a message for a Miss Abigail Clayton?” she asked the young man at the counter.

He shuffled through some papers and then shook his head. “No message, Miss.”

This was not a good start. “Where can I hire a hack then? I need to go to Sayer’s General Store.”

“The hacks are...” The boy stopped. “Did you say *Sayer’s* General Store?”

“Yes. Is it far?”

“Not far.” The boy paused again. “Is it Travis Sayer you’re expectin’ to meet?”

Suddenly, her nape began to tingle like it did when she sensed something was very wrong. “Yes. Why?”

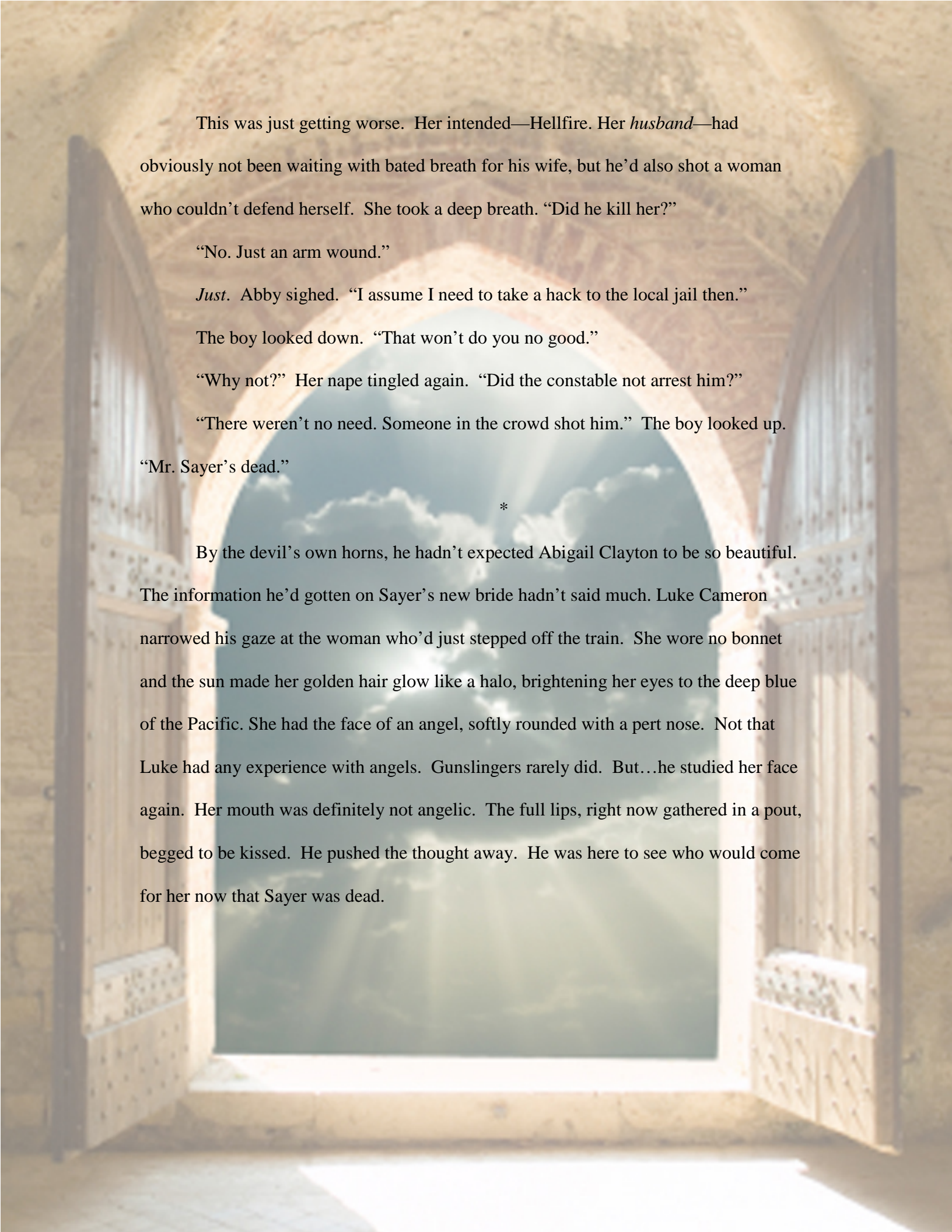
He hesitated once more. “There was a brawl in front of McGiver’s saloon a couple of weeks ago...well, it turned into a brawl after Mr. Sayer shot a wh...a woman.”

Abby shook her head, sure she hadn’t heard correctly. “My hus...Mr. Sayer shot a woman?”

“One of them painted ones from the dance hall next door. He claimed he’d paid for her company and she didn’t want to...” The boy’s face turned red. “...do her part.”

Abby didn’t have to ask what that meant. She’d nearly been forced into the same occupation herself after Ben got arrested. “So what happened then?”

“I heard he grabbed her by the hair and started pulling her down the street. She fought and he pulled his gun.”



This was just getting worse. Her intended—Hellfire. Her *husband*—had obviously not been waiting with bated breath for his wife, but he'd also shot a woman who couldn't defend herself. She took a deep breath. "Did he kill her?"

"No. Just an arm wound."

Just. Abby sighed. "I assume I need to take a hack to the local jail then."

The boy looked down. "That won't do you no good."

"Why not?" Her nape tingled again. "Did the constable not arrest him?"

"There weren't no need. Someone in the crowd shot him." The boy looked up.

"Mr. Sayer's dead."

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By the devil's own horns, he hadn't expected Abigail Clayton to be so beautiful. The information he'd gotten on Sayer's new bride hadn't said much. Luke Cameron narrowed his gaze at the woman who'd just stepped off the train. She wore no bonnet and the sun made her golden hair glow like a halo, brightening her eyes to the deep blue of the Pacific. She had the face of an angel, softly rounded with a pert nose. Not that Luke had any experience with angels. Gunslingers rarely did. But...he studied her face again. Her mouth was definitely not angelic. The full lips, right now gathered in a pout, begged to be kissed. He pushed the thought away. He was here to see who would come for her now that Sayer was dead.