

Excerpt Nostalgia Road

As her aunt drove to the front of the wooden farmhouse, Jo's attention focused across the yard. In the paddock next to the barn, three horses—a bay, a sorrel and a grey—raised their heads to watch the car come to a stop.

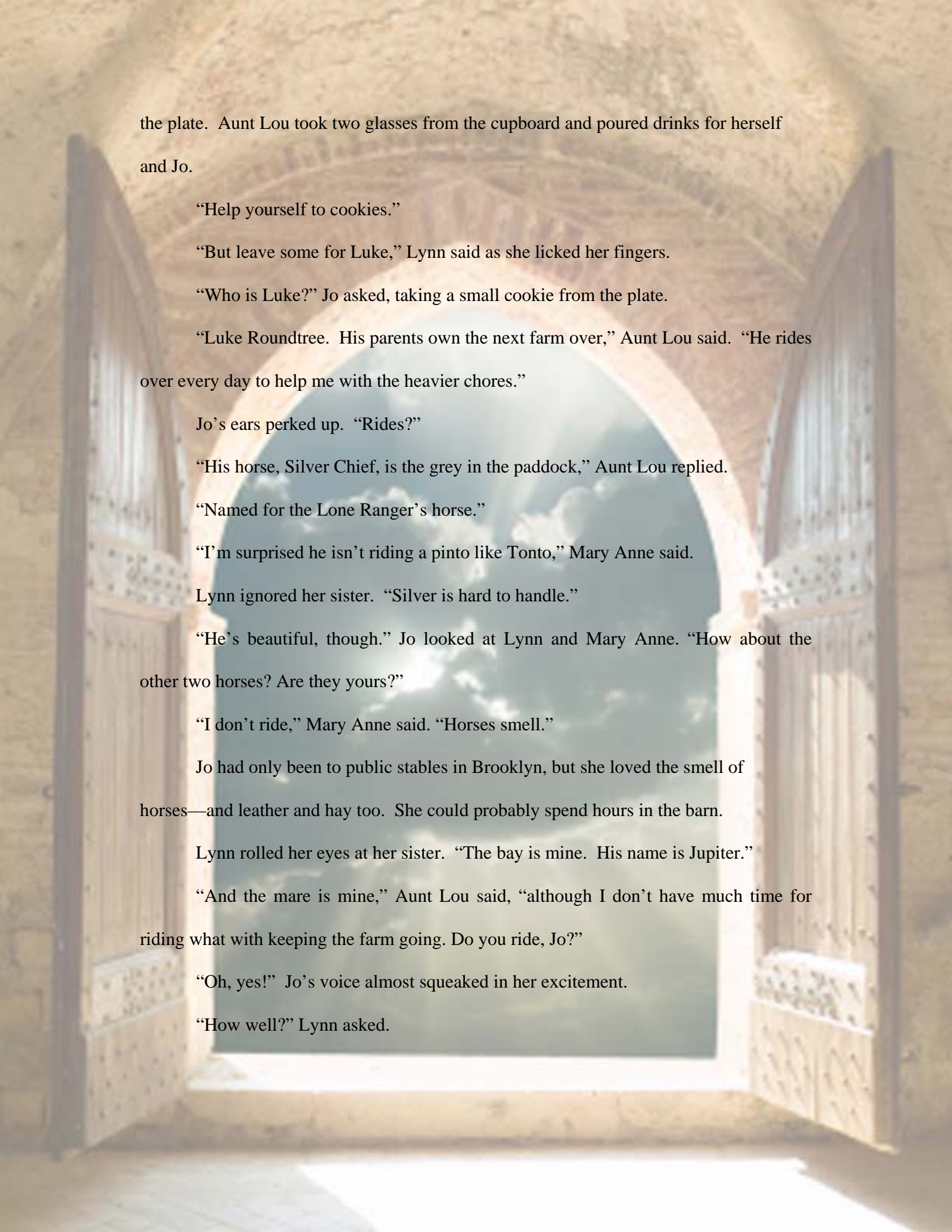
Horses. There hadn't been any on her last visit. Summer vacation was already looking better.

*

Jo could barely contain her excitement on seeing the horses and wanted to rush right over to the fence, but she followed her aunt inside the house and up the stairs to the second floor. The farmhouse was a large one, built in the early 1900s when multi-generational families lived together, so she had been given her own bedroom. She looked around as she set her suitcases down. The pale yellow walls made it feel sunshiny and white organdy curtains swayed from the gentle breeze through the open window. The room was not large, but the single bed was covered with a colorful, hand-quilted coverlet. A wooden wardrobe, painted white, served as a closet and a comfortable looking chair upholstered in gold corduroy sat next to a small table. Overall, the room felt cozy. "It's very pretty. I like the quilt."

"Thank you. I took up quilting several years ago." Aunt Lou smiled. "Now why don't we go downstairs and join the girls? They've probably already devoured half the chocolate chip cookies I baked this morning."

Lynn and Mary Anne sat at the kitchen table with a half-empty plate of cookies between them. A pitcher of lemonade, the glass frosty from the refrigerator, stood next to



the plate. Aunt Lou took two glasses from the cupboard and poured drinks for herself and Jo.

“Help yourself to cookies.”

“But leave some for Luke,” Lynn said as she licked her fingers.

“Who is Luke?” Jo asked, taking a small cookie from the plate.

“Luke Roundtree. His parents own the next farm over,” Aunt Lou said. “He rides over every day to help me with the heavier chores.”

Jo’s ears perked up. “Rides?”

“His horse, Silver Chief, is the grey in the paddock,” Aunt Lou replied.

“Named for the Lone Ranger’s horse.”

“I’m surprised he isn’t riding a pinto like Tonto,” Mary Anne said.

Lynn ignored her sister. “Silver is hard to handle.”

“He’s beautiful, though.” Jo looked at Lynn and Mary Anne. “How about the other two horses? Are they yours?”

“I don’t ride,” Mary Anne said. “Horses smell.”

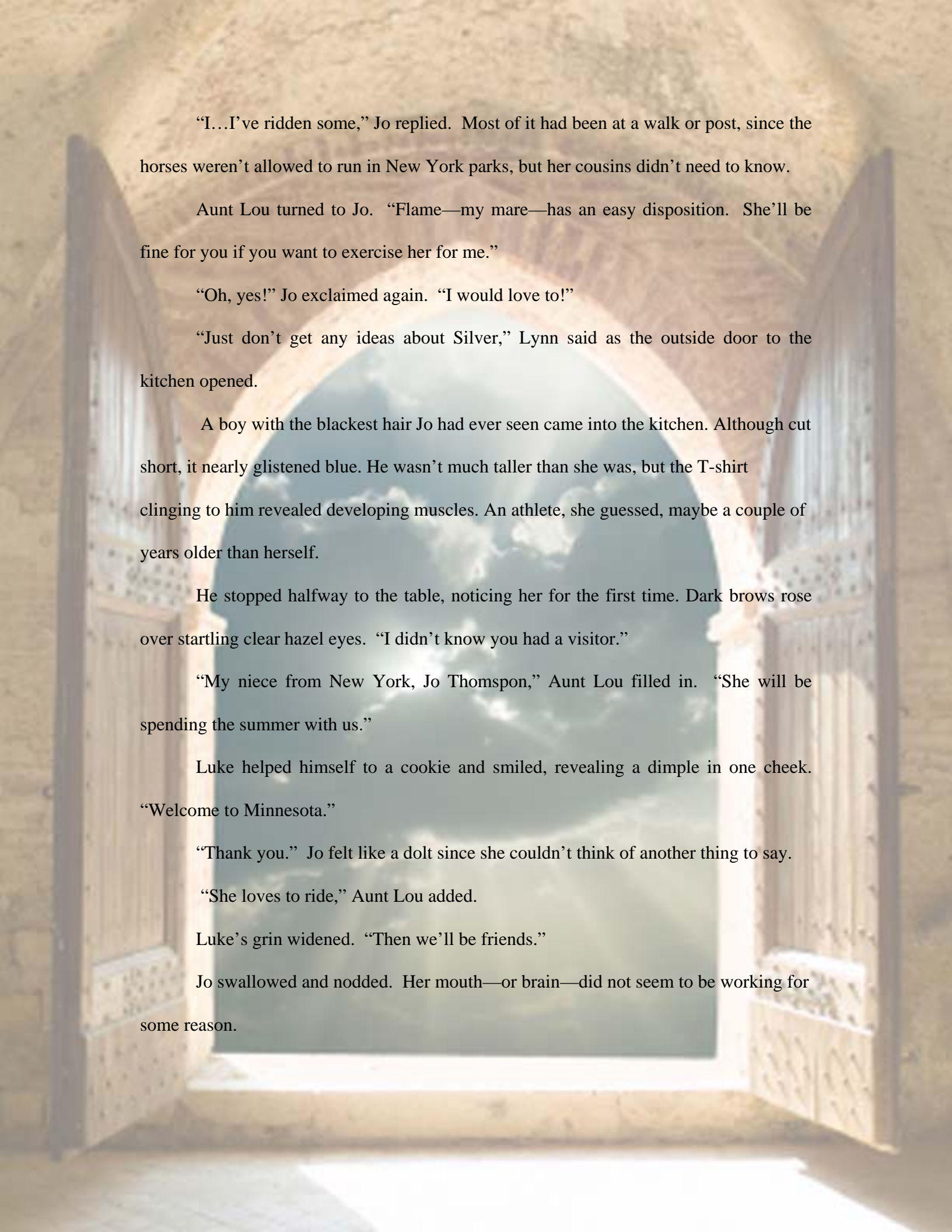
Jo had only been to public stables in Brooklyn, but she loved the smell of horses—and leather and hay too. She could probably spend hours in the barn.

Lynn rolled her eyes at her sister. “The bay is mine. His name is Jupiter.”

“And the mare is mine,” Aunt Lou said, “although I don’t have much time for riding what with keeping the farm going. Do you ride, Jo?”

“Oh, yes!” Jo’s voice almost squeaked in her excitement.

“How well?” Lynn asked.

An arched doorway with a view of a horse in a field. The doorway is made of light-colored wood or stone with intricate carvings. The view through the arch shows a horse in a field under a cloudy sky. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

“I...I’ve ridden some,” Jo replied. Most of it had been at a walk or post, since the horses weren’t allowed to run in New York parks, but her cousins didn’t need to know.

Aunt Lou turned to Jo. “Flame—my mare—has an easy disposition. She’ll be fine for you if you want to exercise her for me.”

“Oh, yes!” Jo exclaimed again. “I would love to!”

“Just don’t get any ideas about Silver,” Lynn said as the outside door to the kitchen opened.

A boy with the blackest hair Jo had ever seen came into the kitchen. Although cut short, it nearly glistened blue. He wasn’t much taller than she was, but the T-shirt clinging to him revealed developing muscles. An athlete, she guessed, maybe a couple of years older than herself.

He stopped halfway to the table, noticing her for the first time. Dark brows rose over startling clear hazel eyes. “I didn’t know you had a visitor.”

“My niece from New York, Jo Thomspen,” Aunt Lou filled in. “She will be spending the summer with us.”

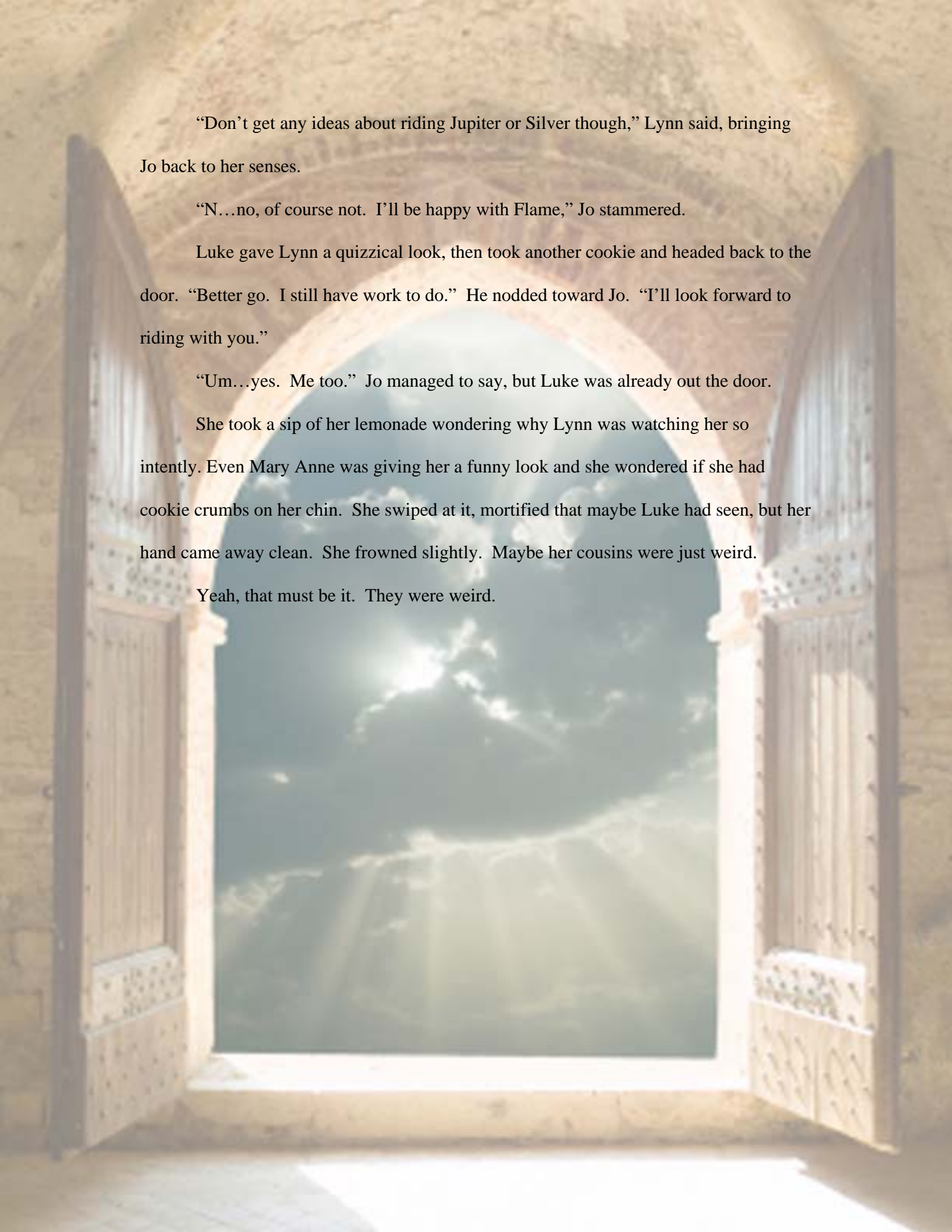
Luke helped himself to a cookie and smiled, revealing a dimple in one cheek. “Welcome to Minnesota.”

“Thank you.” Jo felt like a dolt since she couldn’t think of another thing to say.

“She loves to ride,” Aunt Lou added.

Luke’s grin widened. “Then we’ll be friends.”

Jo swallowed and nodded. Her mouth—or brain—did not seem to be working for some reason.



“Don’t get any ideas about riding Jupiter or Silver though,” Lynn said, bringing Jo back to her senses.

“N...no, of course not. I’ll be happy with Flame,” Jo stammered.

Luke gave Lynn a quizzical look, then took another cookie and headed back to the door. “Better go. I still have work to do.” He nodded toward Jo. “I’ll look forward to riding with you.”

“Um...yes. Me too.” Jo managed to say, but Luke was already out the door.

She took a sip of her lemonade wondering why Lynn was watching her so intently. Even Mary Anne was giving her a funny look and she wondered if she had cookie crumbs on her chin. She swiped at it, mortified that maybe Luke had seen, but her hand came away clean. She frowned slightly. Maybe her cousins were just weird.

Yeah, that must be it. They were weird.