

Excerpts: Court of Love

Love Waits

“Tell me once more why, precisely, we are accompanying the ladies on a shopping expedition?” Charles asked Andrew as they strolled behind the footmen carrying packages from various shops along Bond Street.

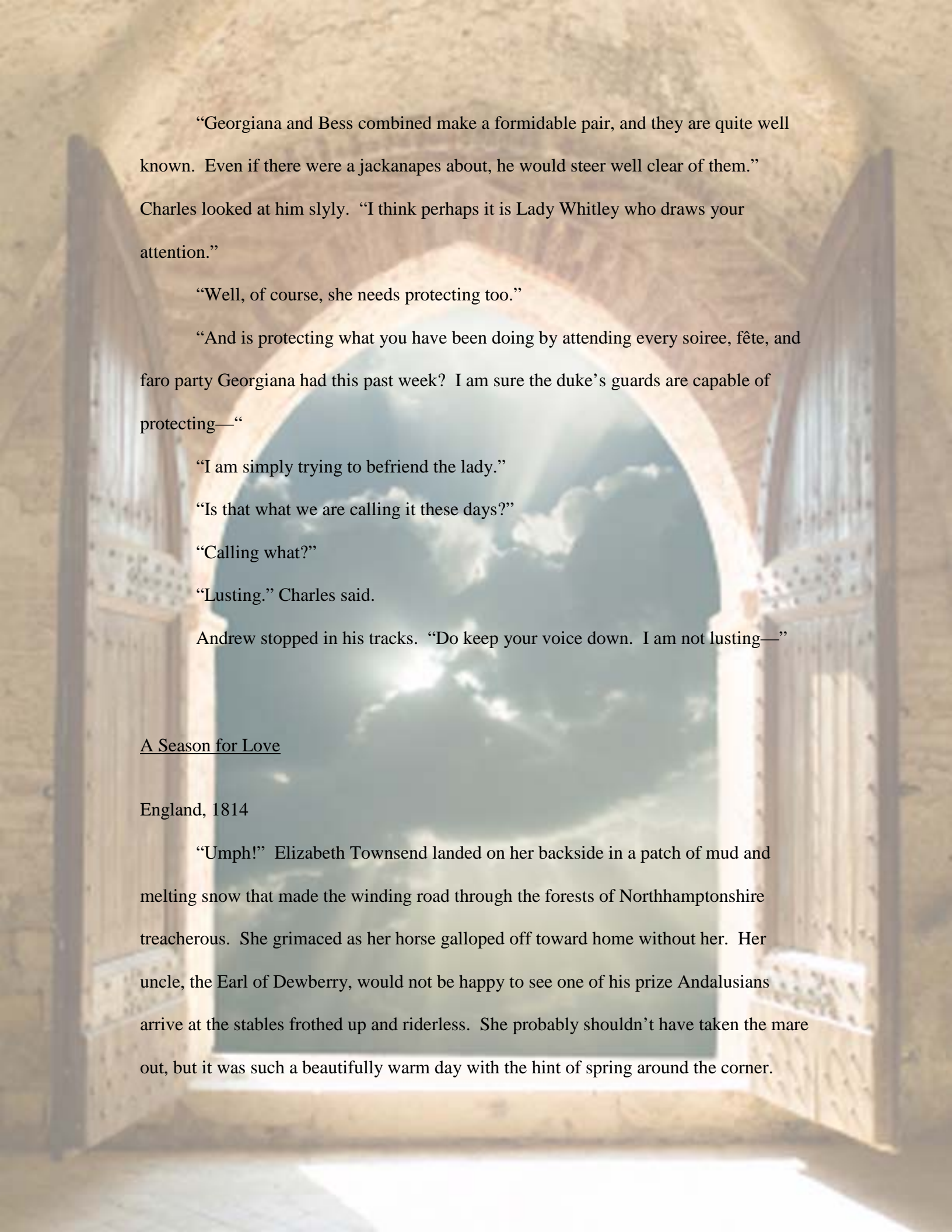
Damned if he wanted to say. Andrew had spent most of the past week trying to gain a private audience with Dacey. The woman kept herself more cloistered than a nun and it seemed Georgiana was protecting her like some well-dowered, virginal noblewoman.

Which she was not. Virginal, that is. Dacey *was* a baroness, he reminded himself as an afterthought. If the *ton*'s on-dits could be believed, Baron Whitley had been quite the lover about town. Dacey must miss the pleasure of being bedded. Andrew was not exactly lacking in seduction skills himself, but to his continued frustration, Dacey seemed immune to compliments or gallantry. The more—or less—he saw of her was going to drive him straight to Bedlam.

“The streets these days are not that safe,” he told Charles. “Just last week, a black guard had the audacity to accost Lord Burley’s daughter in broad daylight.”

“That does not signify,” Charles said with a laugh. “The young lady acts the hoyden and had loitered a bit too long at Covent Garden. She should not have given the slip to her footman.”

“Which is, *precisely*, why we are here,” Andrew said. “A duchess needs more protection.”

A stone archway with two wooden doors leading to a bright, cloudy sky. The arch is made of reddish-brown stone, and the doors are dark wood with intricate carvings. The sky is a vibrant blue with soft, white clouds, and a bright sun is visible in the center, creating a lens flare effect. The overall scene is bright and airy, suggesting a warm, sunny day.

“Georgiana and Bess combined make a formidable pair, and they are quite well known. Even if there were a jackanapes about, he would steer well clear of them.”

Charles looked at him slyly. “I think perhaps it is Lady Whitley who draws your attention.”

“Well, of course, she needs protecting too.”

“And is protecting what you have been doing by attending every soiree, fête, and faro party Georgiana had this past week? I am sure the duke’s guards are capable of protecting—“

“I am simply trying to befriend the lady.”

“Is that what we are calling it these days?”

“Calling what?”

“Lusting.” Charles said.

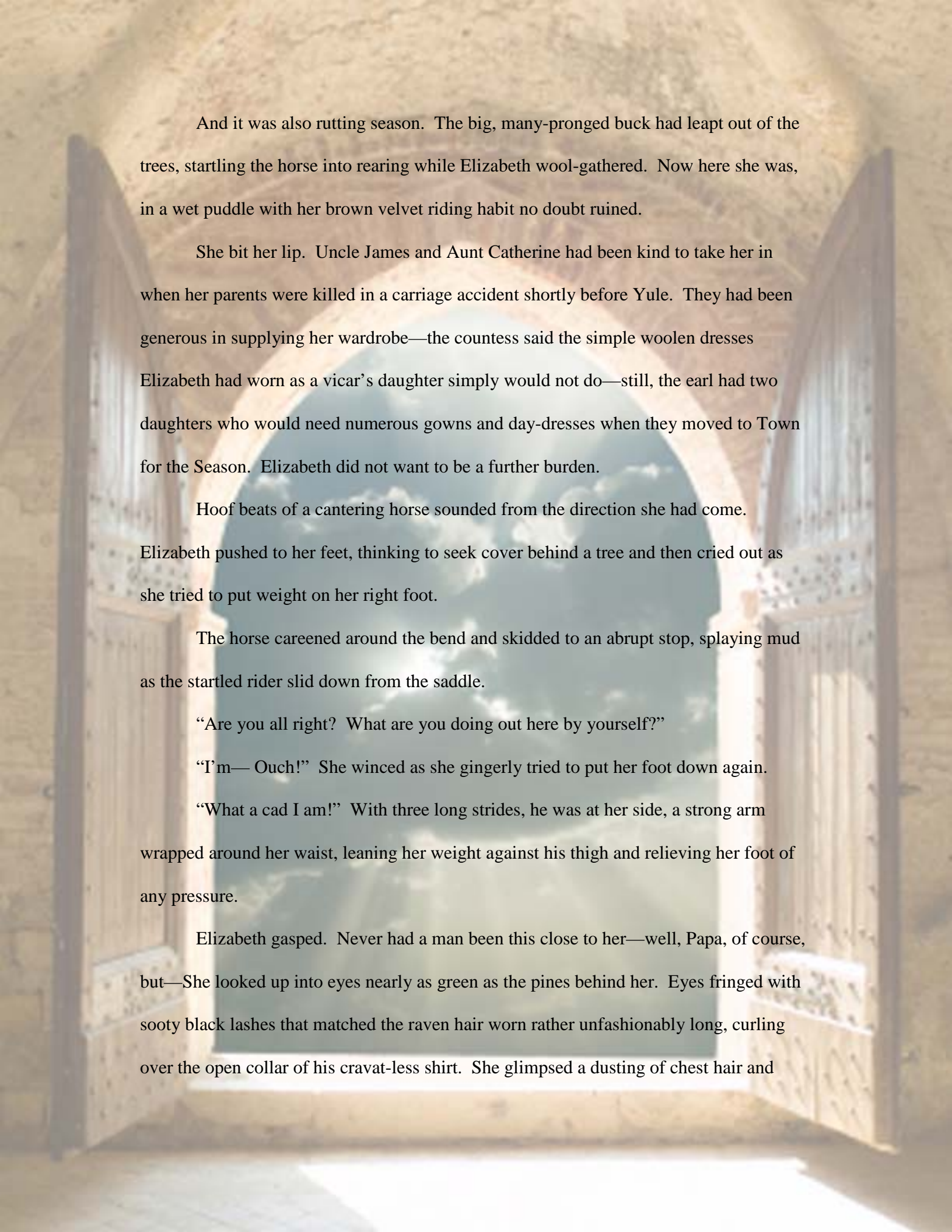
Andrew stopped in his tracks. “Do keep your voice down. I am not lusting—”

### A Season for Love

England, 1814

“Umph!” Elizabeth Townsend landed on her backside in a patch of mud and melting snow that made the winding road through the forests of Northhamptonshire treacherous. She grimaced as her horse galloped off toward home without her. Her uncle, the Earl of Dewberry, would not be happy to see one of his prize Andalusians arrive at the stables frothed up and riderless. She probably shouldn’t have taken the mare out, but it was such a beautifully warm day with the hint of spring around the corner.





And it was also rutting season. The big, many-pronged buck had leapt out of the trees, startling the horse into rearing while Elizabeth wool-gathered. Now here she was, in a wet puddle with her brown velvet riding habit no doubt ruined.

She bit her lip. Uncle James and Aunt Catherine had been kind to take her in when her parents were killed in a carriage accident shortly before Yule. They had been generous in supplying her wardrobe—the countess said the simple woolen dresses Elizabeth had worn as a vicar’s daughter simply would not do—still, the earl had two daughters who would need numerous gowns and day-dresses when they moved to Town for the Season. Elizabeth did not want to be a further burden.

Hoof beats of a cantering horse sounded from the direction she had come. Elizabeth pushed to her feet, thinking to seek cover behind a tree and then cried out as she tried to put weight on her right foot.

The horse careened around the bend and skidded to an abrupt stop, splaying mud as the startled rider slid down from the saddle.

“Are you all right? What are you doing out here by yourself?”

“I’m— Ouch!” She winced as she gingerly tried to put her foot down again.

“What a cad I am!” With three long strides, he was at her side, a strong arm wrapped around her waist, leaning her weight against his thigh and relieving her foot of any pressure.

Elizabeth gasped. Never had a man been this close to her—well, Papa, of course, but—She looked up into eyes nearly as green as the pines behind her. Eyes fringed with sooty black lashes that matched the raven hair worn rather unfashionably long, curling over the open collar of his cravat-less shirt. She glimpsed a dusting of chest hair and

stone-chiseled muscles that seemed to extend beneath his cloak to very broad shoulders. His leg, tightly encased in buff-colored breeches, seemed equally hard.

She was pressed against his thigh. In fact, her whole body was nestled alongside his in the most improper way...and it felt good. Dear Lord, what was she thinking? Did she have attics to let? Elizabeth pushed away.

He looked amused, but released his hold enough to create some space between them. Before she could take a full breath, however, he was down on bended knee, hiking her riding skirt up to her knee.

“Sirrah!” She tried brushing her skirt down, but he just pushed it back up and began removing her half-boot. “This is most indecent!”

He glanced up, his full mouth curving into a smile. “I’m only checking your ankle to make sure it isn’t broken. Put your hands on my shoulders to steady yourself.”

Elizabeth hesitated and then, tentatively placed her hand on one of them—to keep from falling, of course—and inhaled sharply. His shoulder *was* as hard as granite. She had not imagined it. As tan as he was, he must be used to a lot of outdoor work. She glanced at his clothes. Simply cut, but clean; his cloak worsted wool.

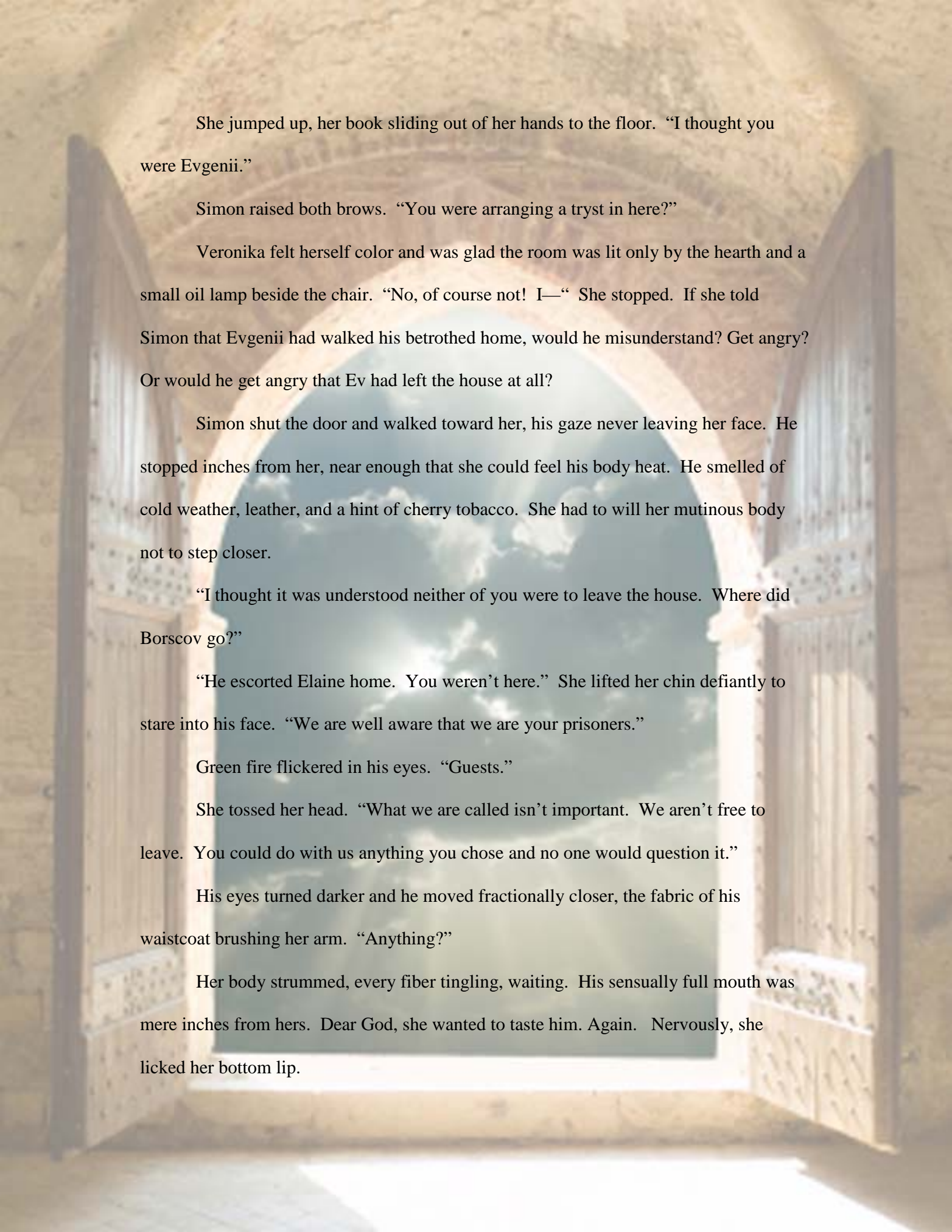
His warm hand closed over her foot, his long fingers gently pressing around her ankle. Tiny prickles of heat coursed up her leg and her breath hitched.

### Enpointe for Love

Veronika didn’t look up when the library door opened. “It took you long enough to get back,” she said.

“Really?” Simon asked.





She jumped up, her book sliding out of her hands to the floor. “I thought you were Evgenii.”

Simon raised both brows. “You were arranging a tryst in here?”

Veronika felt herself color and was glad the room was lit only by the hearth and a small oil lamp beside the chair. “No, of course not! I—“ She stopped. If she told Simon that Evgenii had walked his betrothed home, would he misunderstand? Get angry? Or would he get angry that Ev had left the house at all?

Simon shut the door and walked toward her, his gaze never leaving her face. He stopped inches from her, near enough that she could feel his body heat. He smelled of cold weather, leather, and a hint of cherry tobacco. She had to will her mutinous body not to step closer.

“I thought it was understood neither of you were to leave the house. Where did Borscov go?”

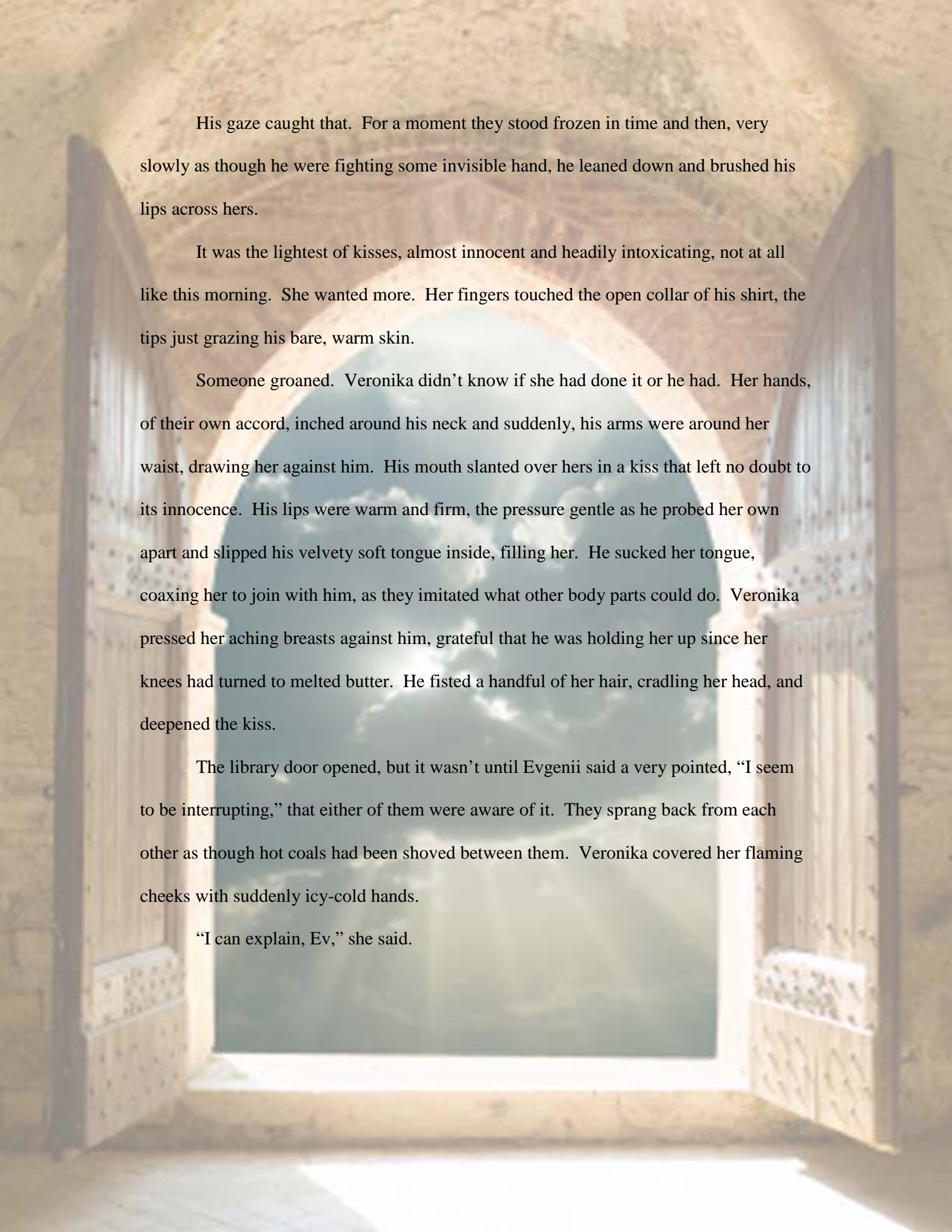
“He escorted Elaine home. You weren’t here.” She lifted her chin defiantly to stare into his face. “We are well aware that we are your prisoners.”

Green fire flickered in his eyes. “Guests.”

She tossed her head. “What we are called isn’t important. We aren’t free to leave. You could do with us anything you chose and no one would question it.”

His eyes turned darker and he moved fractionally closer, the fabric of his waistcoat brushing her arm. “Anything?”

Her body strummed, every fiber tingling, waiting. His sensually full mouth was mere inches from hers. Dear God, she wanted to taste him. Again. Nervously, she licked her bottom lip.



His gaze caught that. For a moment they stood frozen in time and then, very slowly as though he were fighting some invisible hand, he leaned down and brushed his lips across hers.

It was the lightest of kisses, almost innocent and headily intoxicating, not at all like this morning. She wanted more. Her fingers touched the open collar of his shirt, the tips just grazing his bare, warm skin.

Someone groaned. Veronika didn't know if she had done it or he had. Her hands, of their own accord, inched around his neck and suddenly, his arms were around her waist, drawing her against him. His mouth slanted over hers in a kiss that left no doubt to its innocence. His lips were warm and firm, the pressure gentle as he probed her own apart and slipped his velvety soft tongue inside, filling her. He sucked her tongue, coaxing her to join with him, as they imitated what other body parts could do. Veronika pressed her aching breasts against him, grateful that he was holding her up since her knees had turned to melted butter. He fisted a handful of her hair, cradling her head, and deepened the kiss.

The library door opened, but it wasn't until Evgenii said a very pointed, "I seem to be interrupting," that either of them were aware of it. They sprang back from each other as though hot coals had been shoved between them. Veronika covered her flaming cheeks with suddenly icy-cold hands.

"I can explain, Ev," she said.