

Nothing ventured, nothing gained

'Can I suggest you go to Lawrence and Daughter, down that alley there? Largest collection in town! You can't miss it, it's right at the end.'

She squinted through the glare of sunlight reflected on shards of broken bottles. The alleyway was littered with rubbish.

'It looks... dangerous.' she whispered.

'Nothing to worry about!' he reassured her, 'Just stick to the middle...' He chuckled to himself and wandered off along the crowded thoroughfare.

She tried to dispel her unease. She'd searched for weeks now, for just the right fabric to make her dress for the Midsummer Ball. She had to make a good impression, her future depended on it. But nothing had been suitable. Glittery neon-bright lycra, or bland neutrals in stiff and scratchy utilitarian cotton, linen and serge; not what she wanted.

She ventured hesitantly down the alleyway, jumping as she heard the rustling of discarded newspapers and spotted rats scampering around the bins. The gloomy, dusty windows of the unkempt buildings were full of junk, and neon-lit doorways beckoned. She dared't imagine what lay behind them.

She neared the end of the alley; the window a beacon shining out in the gloom. Intricate lamps lit up the name 'Lawrence and Daughter'. But the window was brimful with rolls of neon brights.

'You found it!' he beamed as she entered. He must've taken a short cut. She looked around, despairing. Just more of the same.

'There's nothing here! It's not what I want at all!' Tears of frustration welled behind her eyes, and she blinked furiously.

'My daughter Joanne's upstairs, with our 'special' collection. You'll find what you need up there.'

Reluctantly she climbed the rickety staircase. And her eyes widened; she was in heaven. Damasks and velvets, lace and tulle, in dusky pink, sage green, maroon and teal. A feast for the eyes and for the fingers. A girl, clothed in the softest glowing midnight blue velvet, stood behind the counter.

'You've come to see our collection? How wonderful! It's been days since anyone's ventured up here!'

'But these fabrics are beautiful! How can anyone not love them?'

She chose a soft dusty black lace for her shawl, a deep maroon velvet, and damask for her bodice and skirt and the softest dusky pink tulle for her underskirt. And added several more metres of soft dark fabric to furnish her tiny room.

'Find what you wanted?' He glanced at the bolts of fabrics she carried. 'Yes, I can see you did! I'll show you out the back way.'

He led her through the back door, which led directly to the lively bustle of Queens Square.

'Why did you make me come all the way along that dark alley?' she asked.

'Nothing ventured, nothing gained! Had to make sure you really wanted our special collection, didn't I!' he chuckled. 'You'll visit again, I hope?'

'Yes, certainly! Might come through your back door though!' she smiled. (497)