

Prologue

London, 1846

Nicholas Hardy crept up to the door of his father's study and peeped in.

Good. Pater had dozed off over the Sunday paper, and Mater was reading a novel in her bedroom. It was safe to sneak out.

He hated that they'd be missing tomorrow's parade, culminating in the firing of the guns at the Tower to celebrate the successful conclusion of the Sikh War. But they were leaving early the next morning to join his elder brother Charlie on their country estate. Today, though, he could at least get a look at the preparations and use his imagination to visualize tomorrow's scene.

He peered up and down the hall to make sure the butler was engaged elsewhere, then tiptoed down to the hallstand and took a front-door key from the drawer. Easing the door open, he stepped out, crept down the short garden path and through the gate to freedom.

Disappointingly, the early watery sunlight had disappeared, and the atmosphere was thickening to fog. He'd be lucky to see anything soon. He hurried along the street and almost didn't hear his name called.

"*Nick!*"

His little sister's voice! Not a scream for attention — a scream of fear. *What's she doing here?* He whirled to see a burly man about to turn down a side lane, some ten yards behind, with Rosemary clutched under one arm.

Shocked, confused, he froze for a moment, then yelled "Help! Police!" and gave chase back up the street and down the narrow cobbled lane.

As Nick gained on him, the abductor turned, fumbling in a pocket with his free hand. It came out with a knife.

"Keep yer distance!" he snarled.

Fear lanced through Nick. *What to do? I can't let him take Rosie, but—*

Rosie bit his knife hand.

"Ow! Little bitch!" He snatched his hand away, lifting it high.

Sensing his moment, Nick charged in and head-butted the ruffian in the groin.

With an agonized grunt, the man doubled over and dropped Rosie. She scrambled up and darted behind her brother.

A new voice said, "'Ere 'ere, what's goin' on?"

They all turned, to see a policeman striding towards them, fog eddying around him.

"Thieves! Picked my pocket!" the man gasped out.

"Bloody liar!" Nick shouted. "He—" His voice cracked, embarrassingly.

Taking advantage of the policeman turning to Nick, the kidnapper fled down the lane.

"—tried to run off with my little sister!"

"Hmm." The peeler stared off down the lane, but the fog had turned to a real pea souper, cutting visibility to a few scant yards. He pulled out a notebook and pencil.

"Names, ages and parents' names."

Nick swallowed his frustration at the snatcher's escape. He'd remember that face, and if he ever saw him again...

He pulled himself together. "Nicholas Hardy, fourteen, my sister Rosemary, seven. Our parents are George, Viscount Crawley, and Lady Mary Hardy."

The policeman gave Rosie's old and distinctly grubby dress a skeptical look. "If I might say so, young miss, you don't look much like an 'honorable'."

Rosie was struggling not to cry. “I was playing with my cat, and trying to catch her. She got out in the garden, and *would* keep diving under bushes. I don’t get dressed up for *that*. Then I saw Nick sneaking out, and went to join him. Boys have *all* the fun.”

The constable suppressed a smile. “And why were you sneaking out, young man?”

Nick explained. The policeman nodded several times, then said, “Righto. Lead the way home, and I’ll have a chat to your father.”

Nick scowled. “Oh, hell. Do you have to? I’m in enough trouble with him already.”

“Why, what’ve you been up to?”

“Nothing much, but he wants me to join the Church. I don’t.”

“Nick would be a *terrible* parson,” Rosie said.

The policeman laughed. “I can well believe it.” Then he became serious.

“Tell you what. I’ll follow you home, and once I see you safely inside, I’ll scarper. But first, you have to listen while I give you a serious talk.”

He searched their faces to make sure he had their attention, and they nodded in unison.

“All right. Do you know what white slavery is?” They shook their heads. “It’s what happens when nasty men snatch pretty young girls and sell them to a ... a place that’s not nice.”

“What’s a not-nice place?” Rosie asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Nick said, embarrassed afresh. He’d heard whispered tales at school about places called brothels. But did they actually *sell* girls to them? A horrible picture formed in his mind of his sweet, innocent Rosie being fondled by some disgusting old man, while she screamed for help that didn’t come...

“It’s certainly not a place for young ladies,” the policeman said. “They usually grab poor girls who have no one to protect them. Because you were alone, and were wearing a dirty dress, he must have thought you were a street urchin.”

Rosie pulled a face.

“Let that be a lesson, young miss,” he continued. “Never go out alone, and always dress according to your station. Understand?”

Rosie nodded, staring at him, eyes wide, and clutching Nick’s hand.

“You’re very lucky your brother was able to rescue you from that fellow. Well done, young man. Now, be off home with you.” He grinned. “And just tell your father you’re not cut out to be a parson.”

Nick scowled, and smacked his backside. “I’ve told him already, and I’ve got the bruises to prove it.”

The policeman laughed. “I don’t think you’re the sort of lad who’d let a few bruises put him off.”

“Nick *never* gives up,” Rosie said, hero worship shining in her eyes.

Nick took her hand, and turned to go. “Thank you, constable,” he said. “You’re a brick.”

The policeman followed them home at a distance. When they arrived and Rosie scooped up her cat, now sitting nonchalantly on the doorstep, he gave them an ironic salute and walked on by.

Later, after they’d gained the upper-floor and gone to their rooms undetected, Nick stood gazing out the window, mulling over the events of the day. His fists clenched unconsciously as he fantasized about running into the abductor again. Sometime in the future, preferably, when he’d grown a bit more. Although big for his age, Nick knew he’d need to be an adult for that to succeed.

He turned his thoughts to the more immediate problem. How could he evade his father’s choice of a career for him? Pater was so forceful, and wouldn’t take no for an answer. The bruises on his backside were proof of that.

A distant movement caught his eye; rising above the fog were the four masts of a clipper ship, making its stately way down the Thames on the outgoing tide.

Damned if I'll be a parson! But there's not much else a second son can do ... and I've a good mind to run away to sea.

Chapter One

Ten years later

Nick paused in his brisk walk along Pall Mall to glance at his watch. He had plenty of time before dinner to stop at the Travelers Club; as a new member, he needed to get to know some of the fellows. Turning aside, he mounted the short flight of stairs leading to the front door. Noting the members' badge in his buttonhole, the doorman touched his cap and swung the door wide.

Nick went through to the cocktail bar and glanced around, hoping to see his new friend Anthony, Lord Winchester, but Tony was nowhere in sight.

He recognized only two faces; the first, Lord John Russell, in a huddle with his political cronies. Their gestures and the occasional loud comment suggested they were discussing the recently signed Treaty of Paris, which had settled the Crimean War to nobody's complete satisfaction.

The other, sitting alone, was an individual whom Tony hadn't introduced on the last occasion, although he'd been on the edge of the audience listening to the travel discourse that Nick had given to be considered for membership. What had Tony said about the fellow afterward? *That's Farrell. He's a slimy little toad.*

The "little toad" had risen, and was now approaching him with hand outstretched and a wide smile.

"Mr. Hardy, is it? We weren't introduced the other night. Algernon Farrell, at your service."

Nick somehow knew the hand would be moist and limp, but had no choice but to take it.

"How do you do?"

"Will you join me in a glass of claret? Your introductory talk was most interesting, the other night. I was quite enthralled. You must find life in London rather unexciting after your adventures in the colonies."

"I hope to soon find something of interest to occupy me."

Nick, suspecting Farrell was after something, was curious enough to allow the other to lead him to a table where a waiter placed two glasses of wine before them.

Farrell clinked his glass against Nick's, took a deep swallow then said, "Perhaps I could help you in that regard."

"You have a business enterprise in mind?"

Farrell chuckled. "No, no. This is to do with pleasure. I'm sure a man of your standing and fortune would have no trouble attracting women, but wives can be so boring, don't you think? And mistresses so demanding..."

"Some of them, yes."

Nick now saw what Tony had meant, but decided to see what he was leading up to.

"What a gentleman needs is a compliant girl who's completely under his control, and who'll cater to his every whim. And I happen to know just where to find such a paragon."

"Oh, yes?" Nick's eyes narrowed, but Farrell apparently mistook this as expression of interest.

"At an auction! They're sold to the highest bidder, and are guaranteed virgin, my dear fellow."

Farrell chuckled, his face flushed.

"So there's little risk of disease. And you get your money back if she proves to have been breached." He finished his claret and signaled the waiter for another. "Because of their background, of course, they have to be between about ten and thirteen years of age to have any chance of being untouched."

Nick's mind rolled back ten years to the image of Rosie, kicking and screaming in the grip of the abductor. He suppressed his urge to punch this swine right on his slobbering grin, and forced his expression into one of polite interest.

Is that how people see me? As an amoral sybarite?

"There's an auction tomorrow night, as it happens," Farrell said.

Nick opened his mouth to give the scoundrel a piece of his mind, then a brilliant idea occurred to him, and he leaned forward in a show of interest. "How does one get invited to this occasion?"

"From one of those in the know. A brotherhood, you might say, to which I happen to belong." Farrell smirked, producing two or three cards from his pocket. "I have a few invitations left. One is yours for only five pounds. The address is on the back."

"I know I've been away for some years, but surely white slavery is still illegal? What happens if the police raid the party?"

"Don't worry about that, my dear fellow!" Farrell put his hand on Nick's arm. Nick resisted the impulse to fling it off. "Peelers are not well paid. A bribe in the right place will always keep them away. And who cares what happens to a drab from the slums? Besides, all the bidders wear masks."

Nick smiled. "What is the usual price for one of these guaranteed maidens?"

"Generally about twenty pounds, if one just wants to rent the girl for a time, then hand her back for the brothel. If you want to take long-term possession, you're looking at a hundred pounds or so. The record price was three hundred for one particularly winsome specimen."

"Three hundred pounds! Hmm... So, what happens to a girl when one tires of her? Doesn't she complain to the authorities? Surely not all the police are corrupt."

"The owner has to make sure that can't happen. He can keep her on as a housemaid if the girl is willing. They sometimes are. A life of service can be better than rotting in a slum. Otherwise, he sells her to a brothel. Or, if she's the stubborn type, he sells her down at the docks."

"Which docks?"

"The ones where the cross-channel ships berth. Not to the French, though. Too over-regulated, the Froggies. But they like English girls in the Antwerp and Rotterdam brothels. The girls can't complain if they don't speak the language." He laughed, not noticing that Nick didn't share the joke.

Nick fished out a five-pound note and forced enthusiasm into his reply. "I'll come along, if only to observe the scene. It promises to be entertaining."

He had a spring in his step as he left the club a few minutes later. At last, a worthwhile purpose to occupy his mind as he felt his way back into English society! And perhaps it would give him a lead to the scoundrel who'd tried to abduct Rosie, ten years ago. It still rankled that the bastard had escaped. In his heightened mood even the London fog, with its noxious odor of coal fires and horse manure, smelled sweet.

Although he relished the chance for some excitement in a decent cause, he was affronted that Farrell thought him the type of man who'd want to be involved in this disgusting trade.

Clearly, his reputation as an adventurer had been misinterpreted.

Time to set the record straight.

His housekeeper met him at the door of his temporary accommodation, the two-story terrace house he rented in Berkeley Square. "Good evening, Mr. Nicholas. Dinner's ready when you are," she said, taking his hat and coat.

“Thank you, Mrs. West. I’ll have it right away. Afterwards, would you and Mr. West like to join me for coffee? I have a matter of some importance to discuss with you.”

“Oh! Nothing serious I hope, sir.”

“Very serious. But don’t trouble yourself. It concerns matters outside this household.”

Tom West limped in on the heels of his wife as she brought in the coffee jug. He owed his lameness to the debacle of the Crimean War; the fact that he still had a leg to limp on he owed to the efforts of Miss Florence Nightingale at Scutari Hospital.

Nick had often blessed the fact that he’d happened to walk past the Chelsea Veterans’ Hospital at the instant when Tom had been discharged. Tom had bumped into him, still unused to his altered gait and his new crutch.

After Tom apologized for his clumsiness, Nick had engaged him in conversation and learned this bluff, burly, square-faced individual, with his pepper-and-salt mutton-chop whiskers, had been a sergeant and received his wounds at the siege of Sebastopol.

Over a pint at a nearby tavern Tom had commented bitterly on the dismal employment prospects for disabled veterans. On learning that Tom’s wife was an excellent cook, Nick had immediately offered them employment in his then non-existent household. He’d never regretted his impulsive decision.

“Mrs. West, pour me a coffee and some for yourselves, if you please, then let’s have a chat.”

Once settled around the table, Nick recounted his conversation with Farrell. Mrs. West’s nostrils flared.

“Such depravity! And they call themselves *gentlemen!*”

“Indeed. You’re probably aware that I’ve been somewhat at a loose end since I got back from Australia, while waiting on my agent to find a suitable estate. But now I know how I’m going to fill in my time. These bastards think they’re immune, but I intend to put a stop to this despicable traffic.”

“A worthy aim, sir,” Tom said. “How do you propose to proceed?”

“I’ll need your help. I’ll buy this girl tomorrow night, whatever the price. Mrs. West, I trust you’ll take care of her and reassure her we mean no harm. Then I intend to coach her to be a credible witness and, if we can find an honest policeman, bring charges against the traffickers.”

“Bless you, sir! You can certainly trust me to look after the poor lamb. And Tom will back you up, you can be sure of that.”

“That I never doubted. Thank you. Tom, I want you to hire and drive a carriage, if you please. It may be necessary to whisk the girl away rather quickly.”

Tom gave the slow smile that had deceived more than one person into thinking he was equally slow-witted.

“I’ll carry a loaded whip, too, just in case. And sir, as you’ll be carrying a large sum of money, I imagine you’ll also be carrying your repeating pistol.”

“Indeed I will.”

“And I’ve just thought: I have an old comrade whose brother is an inspector in the Metropolitan Police. If the brother’s anything like the man I know, he could be just the policeman you’re looking for. With your permission, sir, I’ll make enquiries.”

“Excellent! Please do. And Mrs. West, you’ll need to prepare the spare bedroom for the girl. Make it look nice and respectable, with no hint of the whore’s boudoir she may have been kept in.”

Mrs. West gave him a dour look. “I’m sure I’ve no idea of the mode of decoration at such establishments, sir.”

“Of course you haven’t. Pardon me, I—”

“Perhaps you could enlighten me as to what items of decoration to omit, sir?”

Nick could feel his face becoming hot. “I’m afraid my experience also is sadly lacking.”

Catching Tom grinning at his discomfiture, he added, “Perhaps Tom could enlighten us.”

“I’m afraid my lack of knowledge is equal to your own, sir,” Tom said. Nick wondered if his wife noticed the ambiguity of his response.

“I’ll leave it to your undoubted good taste, Mrs. West,” Nick said, rising. “Now I suggest we all get an early night. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

Nick first went to his bedroom and donned the coat with the special inside pocket, then on to his study and took the case containing his Colt navy revolver and its trappings from a drawer. He loaded the gun’s six chambers with powder and ball, then put it in the inside pocket and practiced quick-drawing and dry-firing.

Once satisfied he hadn’t lost the skill that had saved his life — and his fortune — on more than one occasion on the Victorian goldfields, he set percussion caps on the nipples to arm the weapon, then replaced it in the box. Then he went to bed, full of anticipation for whatever the morrow would bring.

The fog barely moved in the still, chill air, adding to the already sinister ambience of Whitechapel Road and intensifying the stink of garbage, horse manure and human waste. Cobblestones glistened with damp where they weren’t strewn with ordure. Any streetlights nearby were either out of order or hadn’t been lit. The only light came from the sidelights of carriages and from a lamp hung over a door down a side passage between two buildings.

Nick had arrived early so Tom could park the brougham strategically beside the entry to the passageway, which he’d reconnoitered earlier. Now he sat out of sight in the dark interior, waiting for a sufficient number to arrive so he wouldn’t stand out in a meagre group. When he’d counted a dozen go in, he slipped on the black silk mask Mrs. West had made for him and stepped down.

“Here goes, Tom. Stay alert for any trouble.”

“Right you are, sir. Good hunting.”

As his employer disappeared down the passageway, Tom stood up from the box seat, stretched, then sat down again and transferred his grip on the carriage whip from the handle to the switch end.

Nick pushed open the door under the lamp and entered a squalid hallway. Doors on either side were closed, except at the far end where bright light spilled out into the hall, illuminating tendrils of drifting smoke. A thuggish individual stepped out of the shadows and growled, “Ya got an invite?”

Nick passed him Farrell’s card and strode on without waiting for permission. He paused in the doorway of the smoke-filled room and surveyed the scene.

Silent, masked men stood around the large room, studiously ignoring each other; all were dressed as he was, in evening wear and top hats. Curtains covered the far end of the bare room. Most of the masks, unlike Nick’s full-face one, covered only the upper half of their faces, leaving their mouths free to puff on the cigars that were filling the room with smoke. Nick saw he was the tallest of the group, so he hunched over as he entered to deflect attention from himself for the time being.

In the almost overpowering fug, Nick found himself longing for the sharp, clean, eucalyptus scent of the Australian bush. He moved to the fringe of the group, leaned against a wall, folded his arms and waited.

More arrivals trickled in over the next fifteen minutes, bringing the number to twenty. After another five minutes' wait, a ripple of attention passed through the crowd as muffled sounds came from behind the curtains, which swayed with furtive movement.

Nick watched as a man, very different from those waiting, parted the curtains and stepped through. He wore no mask, and no evening garb. A bright green waistcoat gaped over a large belly encased in a grubby red-and-white striped shirt. Nick stiffened. He'd put on weight, and his face showed signs of dissipation, but he was sure this was the abductor who'd crossed his path ten years ago.

The night had just become more interesting. Nick studied his quarry.

A bowler hat crowned his broad, red, mustachioed face. Sagging brown trousers were tucked into ankle boots. He gave a theatrical bow.

"Welcome, gentlemen all! Welcome to a red-letter day in the annals of Buller's Gentlemen's Ease Establishment," his gin-soaked rheumy voice declaimed.

"Tonight we have an offering beyond compare. A more mature lass than our usual items, but still under twenty years of age. A pearl beyond price for those whose appetites have become jaded by skinny little girls, and who prefer the charms of a full-fleshed woman—"

"So she's fat as a pig?" a voice interrupted. Nick thought he recognized it as Farrell's.

"Not at all! Merely a girl of sufficient curvature that you'd never mistake her for a boy. And of such beauty as you'll want to keep her as your concubine forever—"

"Get on with it, Buller. Enough of the sales talk, show us the merchandise!"

So he's Buller, the proprietor. He's come up in the world in ten years.

"Very well. Behold, gentlemen, and see that I do not exaggerate!"

He drew back the curtains with a flourish.

Like the others, Nick craned forward.

Like the others, he gasped.

She lay on a bed, eyes closed, clad in nothing but a flimsy white shift, low-cut to show the swell of her small breasts, short to show her well-muscled legs and slender ankles. Thick waves of chestnut hair, its auburn highlights glinting in the lamplight, fanned out across the pillow and down the mattress to the level of her hips. Her rosy lips were parted, giving a glimpse of white teeth that seemed to be all there. Her pale skin was smooth and blemish-free, except for a tiny beauty spot on her left cheek, and some minor abrasions on wrists and ankles that Nick thought were rope burns. He frowned at the implications.

The almost sheer fabric of her shift revealed a faint triangular shadow at the apex of her thighs, and likewise faint pink coins at the peaks of her breasts.

No drab from the slums, this one. The girl was obviously well-nourished and cared for.

For such a girl to turn up in this situation, something very sinister must be going on. Nick's level of awareness moved up another notch, his purpose now more urgent. He must get her away and follow up whatever foul play had brought her to this predicament.

He thought of the sum he'd brought with him. If a thousand pounds wasn't enough, he'd take her from the highest bidder at gunpoint.

The procurer's voice interrupted his thoughts. "What am I bid, gentlemen, for this matchless prize? The record so far is three hundred. Will someone start at that...?"

Someone put up a hand.

"Thank you, sir. Three hundred is the bid. Have I...?"

"Three-fifty. Thank you ... four hundred. Four-twenty. Yes, I'll take twenties. Four-forty ... four-sixty ... any advance on four-sixty? I'll take tens! Four-seventy, thank you sir—"

"Five hundred," Nick said.

"Five hundred!" the procurer bellowed. His broad face broke out in a sweat. "After that, I won't take tens! Twenty is the minimum I'll accept ... thank you sir, five-twenty—"

"Six hundred," Nick said.

A hush fell over the room. Everyone stared at Nick, still leaning on the wall with his arms folded. A voice quavered, “Six ... twenty.”

“Seven hundred.”

Silence. Then the procurer said, “Uh, sir, you do have the money?”

Nick reached inside his coat — the opposite pocket to where the revolver nestled — and counted off seven bundles with his fingertips. He drew out those bundles of twenty five-pound notes, fastened with gummed paper strips, and tossed them at the feet of the procurer.

“Any advance on seven hundred?” he sneered.

Buller pounced, riffled through the notes. Then, still on his knees on the floor, said, “Ah-h yes. Any advance on seven hundred?”

Silence.

“Sold to the gentleman for SEVEN HUNDRED POUNDS!”

The girl — the “item” — hadn’t so much as twitched throughout these proceedings. She was obviously drugged.

“Now, sir, as to delivery—”

Ignoring Buller, Nick strode forward, picked up the girl and carried her to the door. The crowd parted before him.

She was no lightweight. About five-foot-eight, he judged. Certainly no stunted slum child.

He hurried down the hall, out into the outer passageway and took a deep breath of the comparatively fresh air.

Then saw he was not alone.

They came out of doors on either side of him, blocking the passageway, at least a half-dozen that he could see on each side of him in the light of the door lamp.

“Get the girl,” an accented voice said.

Nick slung her over his left shoulder, whipped out the Colt, thumbed back the hammer and fired a shot into the air.

The noise was deafening in the confined space, freezing the attackers for a moment.

“He’s shot off his pistol. *En avant!*”

Nick shot the speaker in the thigh. He screamed and collapsed.

“This is a revolver, boys. Four shots left, and from now on I’ll shoot to kill.”

At that moment, Tom appeared between Nick and the carriage from the rear. He swung the whip by the tip with murderous force; the hollow handle, loaded with lead shot, cracked the skull of one man and broke the arm of another in a single sweep. The remainder stampeded past Nick and vanished with the others down the passageway. The man he’d shot writhed on the ground, screaming vainly at their receding backs.

Nick ignored him, roughly bundled the girl into the brougham and leapt in after her. Tom sprang to the seat and whipped up the horses. They sped off, the horses cantering through the deserted streets. When they’d gained some distance from Whitechapel Road, Tom eased the horses into a trot.

Nick cradled the girl in his arms against the jolting of the brougham. Up close, she was even more alluring; he smelled her sweet fragrance, and became aware of the soft firm pressure of her bottom in his lap. Recalling himself to duty he checked her vital signs, and was reassured when she appeared to be only sleeping.

Arriving home, Tom stepped down to open the door, then assisted Nick and his burden down. Nick carried her up to the door, where Mrs. West met them.

“Lord a’ mercy! Is she hurt?” she cried, seeing the girl limp in Nick’s arms.

“Drugged. I see no sign of injury. I checked her breathing and heartbeat. They seem normal, and I caught a whiff of chloroform. I’ll carry her up and put her to bed.”

Mrs. West followed him up the stairs, drew back the covers of the bed and watched Nick's face while he laid the girl down tenderly, spread her hair over the pillow, pulled up the covers and stood looking down on her.

"She's no slum girl, sir."

"Indeed, she's not. I expect we'll hear quite a shocking story in the morning."

"I'll watch over her, sir. I want to be here to comfort her if she wakes up."

Hearing the tenderness in her voice, Nick realized the beautiful girl had aroused the childless Mrs. West's maternal instincts.

What instincts she'd aroused in him, he wouldn't contemplate at the moment.

"That's very good of you. But you need your sleep also."

"I had a sleep this afternoon, sir, in case I needed to stay up."

"I'll leave you to it, then."

With a last long look at the girl, he left, reluctantly.

He wondered what color eyes she had. Probably brown, he thought, going by the rich hair color.

Nick and Tom made their own breakfasts next morning, as Mrs. West was still occupied with the girl. They were just sitting down to it when the housekeeper appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, Mrs. West. How is our guest? Recovered, I hope? If so, were you able to relieve her fears?"

Mrs. West gave him a peculiar smile.

"Oh, she's awake and fighting fit, sir. And she's not at all fearful. Indeed, she's ... *furios*."

Chapter Two

Athena swam slowly up into the consciousness of a splitting headache. Little wonder, after such a terrible nightmare. From where had her imagination dredged up such shocking events?

Then reality stole over her. It hadn't been a nightmare. Or else she was dreaming the soreness around her wrists and the ache in her muscles, strained in struggling against the animals who'd tied her up on the bed.

But this bed she now lay in was not her familiar bed at home.

Nor was it the putrid one she'd last woken in.

Her eyes jerked open. It took a few moments to blink them clear and focus.

She lay on her side, facing a wall covered in gold-embossed ivory wallpaper that contributed to the soft even light in the room. A bay window further along the wall, framed by brocaded curtains, admitted watery sunlight. The angle of the rays revealed it to be about nine in the morning, assuming the window faced east.

She listened, hearing nothing but her own rapid breathing and a faint distant noise of street traffic.

Recalling the sickly smell of the chloroform, she noticed other smells — or rather, the lack of them.

No smell of stale cigar smoke, unwashed bodies or greasy sheets. These sheets were crisp and clean, smelling pleasantly of soap and lavender.

A soft snuffle sounded behind her.

Slowly, silently, she rolled over.

A woman sat dozing in a chair beside the bed. She looked as clean and respectable as the room in her neat black dress and white apron. Obviously a housekeeper, but it was hard to determine the personality of a sleeper without being able to see the eyes, or any of the expressions that enlivened a face. However, her features seemed pleasant enough, with light brown hair fastened in a bun at the nape of her neck. She appeared to be in her late thirties or early forties.

As if aware of Athena's scrutiny, her eyelids fluttered, then opened.

"Oh! You're awake at last, miss. Sorry, I must have nodded off. Now you're not to worry, you're quite safe here. My dear, what you must have been through! But, rest assured, the master didn't buy you for—"

"Buy me?"

"Don't you remember? You were put up for auction. Such depravity, that so-called *gentlemen* should—"

But Athena had stopped listening at the word *auction*. She flung back the covers and leapt out of bed, but the decisive action was immediately spoiled by a bout of dizziness. She quickly clutched the bedpost and sat down again until the spots before her eyes stopped their sickening gyrations.

"Where is he?" She snarled, lurching again to her feet.

"Who? The man who sold you?"

"No, damn it! The bloody man who *bought* me!"

The woman, after an affronted look at such language, cupped a hand to her ear and leaned in the direction of the open door.

"I expect he's down in the kitchen with my Tom. I think I can hear them chatting. I'll just go and tell them you're awake."

She turned and left the room. Athena hurried after her, but was forced to slow her progress at the obstacle of the stairs, which she had to negotiate by sliding her hand down the banister

as her legs still refused to fully obey her. She arrived at the kitchen door a few moments after the woman announced her to be “furious”.

Pushing past, she shouted, “Yes, I *am!* Which of you bloody reprobates has the effrontery to think he *owns* me?”

The woman gave a gasp and scurried out. The two men sitting opposite each other at the table remained momentarily frozen, giving her a chance to observe them.

She saw an ill-assorted pair: one, a solid-looking individual, dressed in the manner of a respectable tradesman or shopkeeper; the other...

The other had the self-assurance of a gentleman, but a most unusual one. He wore a good quality dressing-gown that appeared to be his sole garment. His face was tanned like an outdoorsman; he leaned one elbow on the table as he studied her, causing the gown to gape and reveal a triangle of skin at the neck, tanned like his face. She’d have thought him an Indian or Mediterranean except his calves and feet — bare feet! — visible below the hem, were as white as any Englishman’s.

She took in his rough good looks, his dark brown eyes and wavy black hair, his shaven face and sideburns of moderate length. If she’d had to describe him in a single word, it would be *raffish*.

His teeth flashed in a smile. “That *reprobate* would be me, and I paid an exorbitant price for you. But, by Jove, I’m beginning to think you might be worth it.”

Words failed her. She could only made an incoherent sound of disgust. Then, as his eyes roved over her, she became aware she wore nothing but a thin shift that didn’t reach her knees. At that moment the woman returned and flung a dressing-gown around her shoulders. Athena shoved her arms into the sleeves and fumbled to tie the sash.

“*Mister Nicholas!* Stop teasing the poor girl. She’s come through a terrible experience.”

“Pardon me,” he said.

Turning to Athena, she said, “Never you mind him, miss. He really means you well, but sometimes he does have this inappropriate sense of humor.”

“Mrs. West, you put me right. As usual. My apologies, m’dear. As you get to know me better, you’ll find I often give in to flippancy.”

Athena felt more bewildered than ever. What sort of servant admonished a master, and what sort of master took that criticism in his stride?

“I seem to have landed in a most peculiar household,” was all she could think to say.

Nicholas cracked a laugh. “You got that right. But it’s a *respectable* household. Mr. and Mrs. West see to that. Rest assured, I didn’t buy you for the reprehensible purpose your vendors intended. My intentions were strictly honorable. I wanted to save you from that fate. Are you hungry?”

Athena tore her eyes away from their laden plates. This observant chap must have noticed she was practically drooling.

“Ravenous! I haven’t eaten since breakfast... I suppose it was yesterday.”

He sprang up and pulled out a chair.

“Sit, sit. The meal is not up to our usual standards, as Mrs. West was occupied in watching over you. Tom and I cooked up a mess of scrambled eggs with cheese, mushrooms, onions and tomatoes. I hope you can choke some down, or would you rather wait for one of Mrs. West’s culinary masterpieces?”

“The mess. Please.”

He chuckled, and took up a large pan from the stove. The man who was presumably Tom passed plates and cutlery. Nicholas scooped out a generous helping for her and a smaller one for Mrs. West, then sat down again and said to the Wests, “I was wrong about the eyes.”

Athena paused, the fork hovering near her mouth. “What do you mean?”

“I thought your eyes would be brown, but they are green-gray, like a sea mist. Most arresting! Well, to business.”

“What business?”

“You’re no doubt wondering about the events of last night. You slept through it all. I will enlighten you while you eat, and then you can tell us how a girl of your obvious breeding found herself in such an unspeakable situation. You can speak freely in front of the Wests; they’re more than my servants, they’re my trusted friends.”

“I ... *think* ... I understand.”

“Well, to begin. From my point of view, it all started when some oily cad accosted me at my club two nights ago with a dubious proposition...”

He went on to tell why he wanted to purchase a girl, and continued up to their arrival home.

“I must say, I was most surprised at the quality of my prize. I expected to purchase a frightened, ignorant moppet whom I’d have to coach in the art of presenting evidence in court. But now, I feel like a man who had gone fishing for a haddock and pulled up a mermaid.”

Bolstered by the food, his apparent sincerity and the reassuring presence of the solid Wests, Athena’s confidence grew.

“Your flippancy is showing again, Mr. Nicholas,” Athena said.

“Indeed it is. Pardon me. It’s Mr. Hardy, actually, but you can call me Nick.”

“The *Honorable Nicholas* Hardy,” Mrs. West said.

“If you want to be formal. And you are...?”

“Athena Beaumont.”

“Athena ... an unusual name. The goddess of wisdom. Why were you given that name?”

“Papa chose it. He said the first time he saw me, I looked at him in such a measuring way, he thought I’d be a wise child.”

“And has he proven correct?”

She sighed. “Sometimes.”

He laughed. “We are all wise only sometimes. Well, Miss Beaumont, are you willing to assist me in prosecuting these despicable white slavers?”

“With the greatest of pleasure, if *you* will assist me in prosecuting my loathsome uncle.”

“Your loathsome uncle? How does he fit into the picture? What crime did he commit?”

“He abducted me and put me up for auction.”

“Ah-h-h... That was going to be my next question. Please, go on.”