

Chapter Ten



'Whatever in the name of all the saints, and all the sinners too, by God, did you boys think that you were doing?' Sir John was red as a hot coal, stamping and hurrumphing as he paced up and down the council chamber in front of James and Nick. 'You have no more sense than this poker here!' Sir John picked up the long metal poker and brandished it like a sword. Nick and James both flinched. 'Far less sense than the fire iron, in fact, because a poker does no harm at all unless it is wielded by some person.' Sir John shook his wartled chins as a turkey might. 'And, by God, I feel like wielding it now on you two boys, I truly do!'

James stood, head bowed. Nick stared straight ahead.

'Do not look so sure of yourself, Raven. I care no more for the danger that you choose to put yourself in than I care what might happen to

Cook's cat. But I DO care for this country and for my King and, and for my own position and that of my family. Do you hear? Do you have any understanding of what you have done, I wonder? Here we stand in His Majesty's own fortress, in a state of war. Our ships are at sea, our countrymen fighting for us. You have surely heard the guns yourselves, for goodness' sake! And yet you attempt to raise a white flag from the topmost point on His Majesty's Tower?' Sir John raised his hands into the air in disbelief. 'My own son!'

'Sir John ...' began Nick.

Sir John Robinson wheeled around and almost spat in Nick's face. 'No, Sir! I will not take any "Sir John" and clever words from you.' He grabbed Nick by his shirt and lifted him up onto his toes. 'Oh, I know exactly whose idea this must have been. And I know exactly what I must do with you, you TRAITOR!'

'But Father ...' said James, stepping forward.

'No, James.' Sir John was shaking his bewigged head. 'There can be no excusing this. None whatsoever. An attempt to send a signal of surrender? It is no more and no less than working for the enemy. It is treason.' Sir John pointed a plump finger at Nick. 'I should have you hung,

drawn and quartered, boy. I should have your head spiked and on show for all to see!' Nick felt as if his insides had suddenly slid down below his knees, leaving the shell of him so weak and empty that he thought that he might crumple and fall. Sir John watched Nick's face, and he softened a little. 'You will be spared the hanging, Raven, but for one reason only. I want nobody, nobody at all or ever, to hear of what happened here today. Do you hear? Both of you? Above all else, the King must never, never know of it. Fortunately for us all it seems that your only observer was James's mother, travelling home and happening to look up from the coach. She, of course, will tell no one. And neither will you, Raven, because you are going far away. I hope that you are fond of sugar? Well, now you can discover the joys of growing the stuff as well as eating it. I shall have you chained and sent to Barbados by the next boat.'

Nick felt sick, but now James was talking.

'You have it wrong, Father. It was I who ordered Raven to climb the turret with the sheet. As my servant, he naturally obeyed. So I am the one you should send to Barbados.' James smiled. 'Besides, I think I might like it there!'

'Don't be ridiculous, boy! Why are you telling me this?'

'Because, Father, you told me that I must always tell the truth. Well, if you send Raven to Barbados, I shall tell the truth. I may even tell the King what happened on the top of his Tower.'

'You would not!'

Nick thought that Sir John might burst open like a plum that has been stewed too long.

'I would, Sir,' declared James. And, to Nick's surprise, Sir John began to laugh.

'Do you know, I do believe that you would, you scoundrell! You always were an honest fellow, James, and it seems that perhaps you are a braver one than I gave you credit for. I'm not sure that I believe that Raven is entirely innocent. Still, I like to see loyalty as much as His Majesty does.' He looked at the boys sharply. 'Can I trust the two of you to tell nobody what happened up there today?'

'You can, said James, and Nick bowed ascent.

Sir John looked to Nick.

'It seems that your young master values you. You may stay for the present.' He raised a finger. 'But you will work in the kitchen now, and I shall instruct Cook to work you hard. And if you bring

any further trouble on my family ...'

'I understand, Sir,' said Nick. Then he looked Sir John straight in the eye. 'And Master James, Sir. Master James is a fine bird, very unlike a chicken. More of an eagle, perhaps.'

'What the deuce are you blethering about now?' But Sir John saw a slow smile spread over his son's face. He chuckled and reached for a glass of wine from the table. 'You young people! Good Lord, Nicholas Raven, you have come to me for punishment and found reprieve yet again. I declare you have the luck of the very devil, do you not?'