



## Chapter Three

They crept along the walled edge of the garden, watching the gardener and being careful about where their own long evening shadows fell. At times they halted statue-still, then scuttled on towards the house. 'Like playing Grandmother's footsteps,' said Mercy.

'Will you hush?' Nick frowned and put a finger to his lips.

The doors of the great stone house were locked and the windows bolted at their shutters, but Nick found an opening that wasn't secured. Low down and near to the servants' entrance there was a wide low, double door that opened outwards. 'It's the cellar,' said Nick. He peered down into the musty darkness. 'Hold on to my hands, Mercy, and I'll drop you down.'

'But it's dark down there!'

'There will be a way up into the house from it. Come on, quick before that gardener comes

round the corner.'

So Nick lowered Mercy into the hole, then dropped down himself, pulling the door flap closed over him. Mercy's hands clung to him, pinch-tight. As their eyes adjusted to the gloom, they could see a little of where they were. The cellar was a low-ceilinged cave of a place, piled with wine bottles and coal, draped with cobwebs and full to the brim with darkness and musty smells.

'It's too dark,' said Mercy.

'It's almost night and night-times should be dark,' said Nick. 'I'm going to look for the trap door.'

'But ...'

'Oh, shush, Mercy! We have to stay somewhere, don't we? Or do you want the watchmen to catch us in the street and send us back to be shut into Mistress Jenkins's house?'

A sudden bump-bump noise came from somewhere up above. 'Ghosts!' said Mercy, her hand to her mouth, and Nick felt a cold shiver down his own back.

'Silly,' he said, but the noise did sound very like a ghost and Nick's voice shook. He thought of Mother in her white night gown, dying. That clammy hand of a thought grabbed him around

the neck. Might Mother come in death to find him, to ask Nick why he had left her to die alone? There was a sharp scraping sound and a sudden loud thump above them, and Mercy crouched back in fear.

'They're cutting off somebody's head!' she whispered. 'I heard it fall!' But Nick had heard another sound now, the clink of a knife on a pewter plate. He hugged around Mercy's shoulders.

'Hush now,' he whispered. 'It's a servant up in the kitchen and eating his supper, that is all. The family must have left a house servant and the gardener to guard their property while they are away.'

'So we can't go up into the house!' Mercy's eyes were big in the dim light. 'We have to stay in the dark!'

'We can be cosy down here,' whispered Nick. 'It's only for one night. I'll find us a better place tomorrow, a truly empty place, I promise.'

'Did the man up there hear us, do you think?' asked Mercy. 'Will he come with a stick and a dog, looking for ...?'

'If he does hear us he'll think it's just rats in the cellar,' said Nick.

Mercy clutched at Nick's sleeve. 'Are there really rats?'

'No,' said Nick, but he knew that there probably were. Nick took off his jacket and wrapped it around Mercy. It was cool in the cellar, but he wrapped her more for the comfort of being wrapped tight like a baby in swaddling than for the warmth of it.

'Nick?'

'Yes.'

'Do you suppose that Mother is dead now?'

Nick paused. 'Yes, I think so,' he said. 'I hope so. She will be at peace and with Father now.' He held Mercy tight. 'We should pray for her soul. Then perhaps eat a little of the bread, and sleep.'

Mercy snuggled close. She looked up at Nick in the darkness, and he could see that her eyes were big. 'I can't bring Mother to mind, Nick. I can't remember what she looks like properly.'

'I'm the same,' admitted Nick in puzzlement. 'But I think we will remember her more clearly after today is over, perhaps.'

Mercy began to weep. 'Why did God make her die, Nick? Why?'

'Because he was angry,' said Nick, and he felt anger thrashing around inside himself too. 'Remember in the Bible? How God was angry, so he sent the flood to kill all the people except

for Noah and his family? Well, it's like that again. God is angry with the King and his friends who live such sinful lives.'

'Then why is it that the King stays safe while everybody else is dying?'

'I don't know,' said Nick. 'But you and I, Mercy, we will be like Noah. We will keep alive.'

'I hope so,' said Mercy. She yawned.

'Bed,' said Nick.

'But we have no bed.'

'Aha,' said Nick. 'We do have a bed. It's just that you can't see it in the dark.' Mercy was familiar with this game and Nick could feel her relaxing against him.

'Go on,' said Mercy. 'Make it grand.'

'Very well,' said Nick. 'Now, let me see. Ah, yes. You, my Mistress Mercy, are wrapped in a silken coverlet embroidered with flowers and birds of all kinds.'

'Not ravens,' said Mercy. 'I don't like ravens.'

'Not ravens,' agreed Nick. 'But peacocks and swans and every beautiful kind of bird. You have just eaten syllabub ...' Mercy sat up.

'Don't talk about food,' she said. 'It will make me hungry for what I cannot have. Tell a story instead. Please?'

'Very well. Lie still, then.'

'Which story is it to be?'

'The Fat Hens and the Thin Hens.'

'I remember!'

'Shush!' Nick put a finger to Mercy's lips, and she lay still. 'Well, there was once a farmyard full of cows and sheep and ...'

'Hens! There were hens!'

'There were a dozen hens, all penned together inside the farmyard just as we are penned within the walls of London.'

'That's not in the ...'

'Shush! I'm telling this story, not you! Well, some of the hens were poor skinny things with knobbly knees and ratty black and brown feathers. They scratched for grubs in the soil and seeds from the grass all day long. But there were other hens in the yard, fat lucky hens who pushed the skinny hens aside and pecked at any of them who tried to get near the farmer's wife when she came out sprinkling corn on the ground. I think those fat hens probably had coloured feathers that struck out like frilled pantaloons around their legs, as fancy as the Kings'. Those fat hens fed their fill on the corn and left only a few poor husks for the skinny hens to eat.'

'Poor skinny ones.'

'Yes, poor skinny ones because not only were they hungry, but the fat hen folk cackled and clucked and felt themselves to be very fine indeed until ...'

'Go on!'

'... Until the farmer's wife decided to give her family a roasted chicken for lunch. She came into the yard and she looked around and she saw the fattest hen of them all, as fat as Mistress Robinson up at the Tower.'

'Nick! You must not say that!'

'And the farmer's wife saw another hen with a beak as big as the King's nose.'

'Nick!'

'And the farmer's wife took hold of their two necks and she swung them into the house where she had them hung, drawn and quartered, and I dare say stuffed with apricots and walnuts and cooked in time for the farmer's dinner. And what do you think the skinny hens did then?'

'They laughed!'

'They did. And, after that, the fat hens were frightened every time the farmer's wife opened her door in case they were the next ones to be chosen. They tried to hide behind the skinny ones, but it

never worked because the thin hens were too thin for fat hens to hide behind.'

Mercy laughed. 'Tell another story!' she said, suddenly sitting up.

'I thought you were tired!'

'No. Tell another bird story, Nick. Please?'

'I'll tell a little story about a raven.'

'I don't like ...' Mercy pulled a hand from her jacket wrapping and thumped Nick on the arm.

'But this is a good story about a thirsty raven,' said Nick.

'I'm thir...'

'Shush! One hot dusty day a raven wanted a drink. He could smell water somewhere nearby, so he went looking for it. He found a tall thin jug that was half full of lovely cool clear water. But when the raven tried to drink, his beak wasn't long enough to reach down to the water. What could he do?'

'Knock the jug over?'

'No, silly! That'd spill the water and it would all be lost! No. This was a clever raven. He hopped over to a place where he found a pebble. He picked the pebble up in his beak, then hopped back to the water jug and dropped the pebble into it.'

'Why?'

'You'll see. He hopped around and found another pebble, then another and another, and he dropped them all into the jug. And each time he dropped in a pebble the water in the jug rose higher until ...'

'The raven could reach to drink it!'

'That's it.'

'I still don't like ravens,' said Mercy.

'Just go to sleep,' said Nick, suddenly too tired to humour her any longer. He laid Mercy as comfortably as he could on the rough cellar floor. He felt the shape of her and found her head and shuffled himself under it to make her a pillow of his lap. Then he stroked and stroked her hair to sooth her to sleep. Don't think of Mother, he told himself as he stroked Mercy's hair on and on. But thoughts of Mother came at him anyway, thoughts that made him feel faint and dizzy. Nick breathed deeply and tried to stop the sick feeling from rushing up inside him.

As Mercy slumped asleep, Nick got up, and he wobbled. Perhaps he was just weak from hunger? Nick reached for the food bundle and he pulled out a piece of the meat to chew. It tasted rank, aged fast by the hot weather, but Nick pinched his nose shut and made himself eat that meat

anyhow. They couldn't afford to be fussy about what they ate now. They had no money or spare clothes and little food and no drink. How long could they last without those things? Nick kicked the floor. Father's death and now Mother's, all the fault of that man; the King.

Nick felt the air, dark as soil, all around him in this underground place, and he gasped for breath. Sit down, Nick told himself. Calm yourself. But as he bent down he put his weight onto his hand, and there was something soft and furry that moved under it. Nick gasped and snatched his hand away. It was a mouse, dead and warm, squashed under his hand. Nick picked the dead mouse up by its tail, then he scrambled up, out of the cellar, and out into the fresher air of the moonlit garden, where he threw the dead mouse as far as he could.

The garden was a black and white and grey place in the moonlight. It was quiet. Nick breathed in the space and freshness of it. He stretched his arms wide and felt calmer. Glancing up at the house, he saw that there was no glimmering candle light behind any of the windows, not even at the windows of the servants' rooms at the top of the house. Anyone inside must be asleep by now. So for a while the garden was his.

Nick didn't go far from the cellar in case Mercy woke and found herself alone, but he wandered under the apple trees. He found a few bruised or maggoty apples that the gardener hadn't thought worth taking into the house. It was a little more food that they could take and eat. As Nick bent to pick up another apple, something big and raggedy and black suddenly flapped towards him.

'Krack!'

Nick instinctively ducked with his hands up to protect his head. Then he saw what had flapped and made the noise. A raven had landed and was jumping over the grass in great galloping leaps.

'You again!' said Nick. 'Isn't it?' He looked closely at the bird. He was almost sure that he recognised the shiny tar-black feathers that tufted up on top of the bird's head. 'My burton-thief devilish friend!' said Nick. He had forgotten the burton in all that had happened. He parted his breeches pocket now and felt the burton still safe inside. One small item that he and Mercy could sell or exchange for food. 'Have you come stealing once more? Do ravens eat apples?' asked Nick. Then he saw. The raven had his eye on something other than apples. Its gleaming eyes looked towards the place where the dead mouse lay on the grass. The raven looked at

Nick, head quizzically on one side.

'Go on, take it,' said Nick. 'I don't want it.' The bird swivelled his head to look behind, and Nick realised that two other ravens had also landed, also attracted by the mouse. They were big ravens, fully grown. 'Go on,' Nick encouraged his raven. 'Eat it quick before those others get it.' His raven took a step forward and swung its sharp-beaked head up, then down, like a man working a pick-axe. But a moment later the raven wobbled unsteadily. 'What is it?' A feeling of horror was creeping down Nick's neck. The bird was staggering very like the way that Mother had staggered when the plague came in her, very like a man who has had overmuch ale to drink. Suddenly the bird fell down onto the grass, stone-stiff. 'Oh, no!' whispered Nick.

The raven lay quite still, with its black three-toed feet up in the air like miniature winter trees. It's been poisoned by the mouse, thought Nick. The two other ravens were watching. Now they shifted uneasily on the grass, then flapped wide their dark wings and rose up into the night sky and away. Quick as a blink, Nick's raven flipped over onto its feet and began to peck at the mouse again. Nick laughed out loud. 'You crafty devil! You are as good an actor as any of them at the playhouse!

I see your game, pretending to be poisoned to put those others off wanting the mouse!

Nick watched his bird tearing at the pink mouse flesh, then strutting across the grass, coming close to Nick. 'You have no fear at all, do you, Devil?' A pigeon or sparrow or thrush would have fled as soon as they had pecked up any food to be had, but the raven seemed to enjoy sauntering around the garden, side by side with Nick. Until it had suddenly had enough of that and flapped up into the sky, flying eastwards and away. Towards the Tower, thought Nick. That's where the ravens like to fly at night. He'd seen them, hoards of them, all tumbling in the sky together in a kind of dance with the moon behind them over the pale White Tower.

It seemed lonely in the garden once the raven had gone, and Nick thought of Mercy on her own too, down in the cellar. To carry the apples he'd found, he made a scoop of his shirt in the way his mother had used to use her apron to hold things when she didn't have a basket handy. Nick crawled back down into the cellar that blinded him with its darkness. He felt his way and unloaded the apples carefully onto the floor. He hoped that they wouldn't attract more mice.

He pushed the apples further away, just in case. Then he felt gently for the warm curve of Mercy on the floor and he lay down, curled around her. I shall have to learn to do tricks like my friend Devil if I am to keep you safe and fed, Mercy, he thought.

Nick slept, but it was a sleep full of nightmares about his mother that woke him, trembling, while it was still dark.