



Chapter Six

'Let go!' gasped Nick.

'Are you a spy?' bellowed the man. 'Working for the French? Or the Dutch? Or those who are against the King within our own country?'

'No!' Nick struggled. But his fever seemed to have drained his strength, and his attempt to escape the man's grasp was so feeble that the big man laughed.

'Not a very great threat to His Majesty, I think!'

'Krack!' The raven was suddenly flapping at the man's legs, threatening with his beak. And Nick remembered that he had a weapon of his own too. He was about to declare himself a carrier of the plague. The man would let him go quick enough if he knew that! But Nick thought how that would bring a quick end to his time in the Tower. He must be cleverer than that if he was to stay long enough to bring sickness near to the King. Nick tried to think clearly.

'You should let go of me,' he told the man, enjoying breathing disease up into his face. 'I am here on an important errand.'

'Indeed?' sneered the man. 'And what kind of errand would that be?'

'I have a message. For Sir John Robinson.'

'Oh, yes? And who is the message from?' The man let Nick go, but stood so close that Nick could smell the sourness of his sweat. 'A message from the King perhaps?' he asked, smiling at his own joke.

Nick tried to stand tall and firm. 'Indeed,' he said. 'It is a message for Sir John from the King.'

The man chortled. 'Oh, my! Well, in that case I had better not delay you any longer or I could be accused of treason, could I not? Give me the message and I will see that Sir John receives it.' The man held out a hand, then smiled when Nick shook his head.

'The message is not written down,' Nick told him. 'I am to tell it to Sir John in person.'

The man curled his lip. 'Then I had better hurry you straight to him!' He grabbed hold of the back of Nick's shirt and marched him up to and through a door into a grand white house. Inside smelled of wax polish and rich food and sweet wood fires.

Sunlight shone on polished furniture and rich colours on the floor and walls. Nick reached out to take hold of a chair to steady himself, but the man swiped his hand away, and Nick staggered.

'Stand up straight,' said the man. There was a sneer in his voice. 'Or some might not believe that you are truly on a mission for the King!' The man straightened his wig and brushed a hand to smooth his jacket front. 'Now then,' he said. 'Sir John and Lady Robinson are dining with guests at present, but I am sure that he will want to be interrupted by such urgent business.'

'It could wait awhile.' Nick cleared his throat and tried to sound braver. 'In fact, I think that the King would rather that I told Sir John the message without other company present.'

But the man had already burst through a great white door into a room full of colour and laughter and smells of spiced food that made Nick gasp for breath.

'Gracious, Bailey, whatever have you got there?' Sir John slouched in a fine leather-padded chair pushed back from the table. His waistcoat was unbuttoned and his wig was slightly askew. Mister Bailey's hand prodded Nick's back to push him forward. 'It is a boy, Sir.'

'A boy?'

The five gentlemen, one large lady and a sulky looking boy stopped talking and all turned to look at Nick. Nick felt his ears go hot. Would Sir John recognise him from the incident on the wharf? Would they see the sickness in him and have him flogged for daring to bring disease into their home? Nick looked down at his ragged shoes on the fine Turkish rug. Mister Bailey jerked him upright again.

'This boy sneaked through the gates, Sir John. I followed and caught him.'

'Then deal with him, Bailey!' said Sir John. 'Why serve him up as if he were a plate of gilt gingerbread to finish off our meal? I don't find him in the least bit appetizing!' Sir John looked around the table, and the company all laughed a little at his joke.

Mister Bailey put a hand to his mouth and did a small cough. 'I thought to bring him straight to you, Sir John, because ...' Mister Bailey left a dramatic pause and tilted his head back. 'Because the boy tells me, Sir John, that he has come to us on an errand from the King.'

'From His Majesty?'

Now there was real laughter around the table.

Nick felt his heart thumping hard within his chest. He saw the boy roll his eyes at the large woman and pinch his nose. The boy had fair curling hair and clothes as fine and fancy as those worn by the older people present. Nick glanced down at his own sweat-filthy torn shirt. A shirt cut down by Mother from an old shirt of Father's. Yes, thought Nick as he looked at the boy, I probably do sink, but I don't look as stupid as you do in your lace frills! He stared hard at the boy, until the boy turned away and pretended to be busy slicing an orange.

'Well?' Sir John was wiping a napkin over his mouth. 'What does His Majesty want with me so urgently that he must send word with so unusual a messenger? Your message must be something of mighty importance. Something very secret perhaps? A matter of war, I shouldn't wonder. Are we to surrender to the Dutch and deliver them His Majesty's crown and sceptre? Or perhaps I am to let the lions loose from the Tower zoo to chase the last of the pestilence within the city walls?' Around the table, chins and wigs wobbled with laughter. The boy snorted a scornful laugh at Nick. Sir John was enjoying himself. He doesn't know me from the wharf, realised Nick. He felt

the power in that. I know more about you, Sir John, than you know about me, he thought. And I am sick with the plague and have nothing to lose since I am bound to die soon anyway. I have the advantage here, for all that you have the money and position to scorn me.

Sir John went on, 'Maybe His Majesty wishes me to declare a public holiday and place wine in all the city fountains as we did for his coronation? With fireworks too, I wouldn't wonder. Well, boy? Has Mister Bailey understood you aright?'

Nick looked at the grand folk laughing at him. He felt the heat of indignation at the back of his neck. But, strangely, he was feeling stronger now, steadier. He remembered a child who had laughed at him years ago when he and his parents first came to the city. The boy had scorned Nick because Nick had never ridden in a coach. That boy's father was a coachman and so the boy often took a ride in one. One day Nick's Father had overheard the taunting and he told the boy that very soon a Master Orrow would be coming in a very fine coach to collect Nick and take him wherever he cared to go. The boy had muttered something and gone away. And Nick had turned to his father and asked, 'Who is Master Orrow?'

Is he really bringing me a coach?' And Father had tapped the side of his nose and told him, 'Master Orrow is a fellow called Tom, Nick. And you know as well as I do that Tom Orrow never truly arrives!' Father laughed then, but it wasn't until some while later that Nick understood the joke.

Nick smiled to himself and stood up straight and tall. He told Sir John, 'Sir, your man has both understood and misunderstood me. My message is from a man named King. He is a Master Jo King, Sir. He sent me here to tell you a piece of wisdom. He says to tell you that to have a stitch or two of a tapestry is not to see the whole picture clear.'

There was a moment's pause as these words worked on wine-addled brains. Then Sir John and the rest of them sitting at the table began to laugh. Mister Bailey suddenly cuffed Nick's head hard, then took rough hold of one of Nick's arms and twisted it up his back to make Nick dance on his toes. Lady Robinson held up a hand.

'No, Mister Bailey! The boy has the wit to make you look foolish, but that is no reason to hurt him in that horrid way!'

'Let the boy go, Bailey,' ordered Sir John, and he thumped a fist onto the table, making wine jump in the glass goblets. 'Ha!' he laughed. 'The

cheeky scoundrel has you there, eh, Bailey! Master Jo King.' Sir John turned to his wife. 'Did you follow the joke, my dear? And the message is that to see a part of a thing is not to see all of it. That's very true,' he nodded. 'Very true.'

'I understood this boy very well from the start,' said Lady Robinson, lowering her head but looking directly at Nick through her eye-lashes. I see that this is a poor sort of boy, but one with pride and a degree of bravery that makes me think that he perhaps has noble blood in him to some degree. Is that so? What is your name, boy?'

'Nicholas,' said Nick.

'Nicholas whom? The family name is the important part of it.'

Nick thought of the trouble that he intended to bring to these smug people and their master and he knew that the blame for such trouble must never come to land on Mercy. The name Truelove must be kept secret and he must find a different name for the character he was playing.

'Raven, my Lady,' said Nick. 'My name is Nicholas Raven.'

'Indeed?'

'Indeed,' said Nick, and he thought, that is truly who I am now. I am Master Raven, as

cunning and quick as my bird friend. I shall use these people who serve the King as I want, and then I shall go to my death. But Nick saw and smelled the remains of food on the table in front of him, and it was hunger rather than sickness that he felt now. Well, he told himself, why not try your raven cunning and see if you can earn yourself a bite to eat? Play the servant in order to be the master. So Nick rubbed one dirty shoe down the back of his rumpled stocking. He let his head drop humbly. He looked at the table, at a pie with a pastry crust crumbling into rich brown gravy. He looked at the fruits spilling over the edge of a silver plate. He put his head on one side in the way that had endeared the raven to him enough to offer the bird a crumb.

Lady Robinson popped a sugared plum into her own mouth and then waved a hand towards Nick. 'The poor soul!' she said. 'There is hunger in his eyes. He is no older than you, James, do you see?'

The boy, James Robinson, curled his lip. 'Send him home to his dinner, then, Mother.'

'Does he have a home?' said Lady Robinson, her eyebrows arched. 'You do not come from a place with the pestilence within it, do you, Nicholas Raven?' She snatched a posy of herbs that sat

beside her dinner plate and she put the posy to her nose.

'Madam,' assured Nick. 'I am from the country near the sea where the salt air has kept the disease well away.' That wasn't a lie. Nick and his parents had moved from the coast when he was small. And, after all, Nick had given fair warning that to know a little of something was not to see all of it.

Lady Robinson frowned. 'Then why come to London at this time when those any with sense are fleeing it? Why have you come to the Tower, Raven?'

'Why, My Lady Robinson,' Nick smiled at her. 'I want to serve my sovereign lord, our good King Charles. That is why I came to his Tower and to his truest friend, Sir John Robinson. I am here to offer my services.'

'Gracious!' said Lady Robinson. 'A noble aim expressed with enough grease to slip your way out of the trouble Mister Bailey hoped to trap you in. You are a bully, Mister Bailey! I suggest, Sir John, that we take this Nicholas Raven into our household.'

Sir John looked startled. 'Really? Take him on as what exactly, my dear? Should we lay him against

the crack under the door to keep out the draught? The boy has no skill that we know of and, besides, he is far from clean.' Sir John wrinkled his nose.

Lady Robinson took another sugared plum from the plate. 'A good wash can put that to rights. As I say, my dear, he is much the same age as James, by the look of him. Why not let James have him for a foot boy?'

'Mother!' There was disgust in James Robinson's voice, but Lady Robinson ignored him. She lent close to Sir John, and Nick heard her mutter, 'It will do no harm if a little of this boy's sharpness of spirit comes to rub off on James. What do you say?'

Sir John patted his full stomach. 'I say, let this Nicholas Raven show us how well he wishes to serve his King by serving his King's friend's son well. Now, let us turn our attentions to some music and perhaps a little more wine. Come!'

The grand people rose rather stiffly to their feet and made their unsteady way towards a door in the far wall. Lady Robinson was the last to leave the table. She gave Nick a great wink and tossed him a sugared plum. 'See him cleaned and told his duties, Mister Bailey.' She looked sternly at Nick. 'You were brought for punishment and

we have been kind. I expect that kindness to be rewarded.'

For the first time Nick felt a twinge of guilt at the thought of what he had brought within the great Tower's walls. Then he bit into the plum oozing sticky sweetness and thought only of the wonder of the taste of it, until Mister Bailey grabbed him by the shirt neck once more.

'Move!' he said.