

## Chapter Seven



Down in the kitchens Nick was scrubbed clean and dressed in cast-offs from Master James. The clothes were far grander than anything Nick had worn before but they were rather short in the sleeve and wide in the waist. Wearing another boy's clothes gave Nick even more of a feeling of playing a part rather than being his true self. Washing had cooled and refreshed him. And eating a piece of pie and drinking the small ale put in front of him by Cook made him feel stronger.

'Here, young Raven,' said Cook, handing Nick a cup of milk. 'This one isn't for you. You're to take it to Master James. You take it up to him, quick smart.'

'Which way?' asked Nick, and Cook told him how to find James's room.

So Nick set off up the polished stairs with the cup of milk. He could smell the good clean creaminess of it and his fever seemed to have left

him with an endless thirst. Nick wondered what his raven friend would do if such temptation was offered him. Nick stopped at the top of the broad polished stairs. He glanced over his shoulder to check that nobody was watching. Then he lifted and tipped the cup to swallow a good swig of smooth milk. Wiping the back of a hand over his mouth, he grinned. There was a blue and white vase of late summer roses on a table beside him. Nick tipped a little water from the vase into what was left of the milk to top it up before he knocked on Master James's door.

'Come!' said James's haughty voice, and Nick pushed open the door.

James Robinson took the cup and drank. Then he wrinkled his face in disapproval.

'This milk tastes too thin,' he declared.

'Ah yes, it will do, Master James,' said Nick, head bowing a little as a good servant's should. 'They told me in the kitchen that the milkmaid who brought the milk this morning warned that today's milk was bound to come a little thin on account of there being so much dew in the night. The cows supped-in the water on the grass along with the grass itself. That is how it works, you know. Cows chew grass and work it into milk.'

'I know that very well!' scowled James.

'Then you will understand that such thin milk cannot be helped when there is rain or a dew the night before a cow is milked.'

'I never heard that part of it before.'

'But I dare say that a fine gentleman like yourself has few dealings with cows,' said Nick, knocking fluff from James's jacket with a little more vigour than was necessary. 'It is something that is well known to us country folk.'

'Oh,' said James. Then he tipped his head back, nose lifted to compensate for his short height.

'Well, country folk should know a good deal about brushing dust off shoes and such. So see that the pile in the corner is cleaned and hung properly. Then you must tidy my room and clean my firearms before the tutor arrives. Do you hear that, Raven?'

'Yes, Sir,' said Nick, and he longed to trip Master James Robinson so that he might fall on that long nose of his and dent and bloody it.

As he moved through that first day, Nick began to suspect something. When night came and he lay on the small pallet in the kitchen of the grand house within the walls of the Tower, Nick was sure of it. He did not have the plague. His fever

had left him. There were no swellings when he felt over his body. Even his headache had dulled so that it hardly bothered him now. He was tired, exhausted by all that had happened in the last two days, but he lay with his eyes open, uneasy. He felt adrift, unsure of both the world and himself. He felt stronger in his body, yet, strangely, that healthiness made him feel weak as well. Nick's eyes became hot and he knew that tears would fall if he blinked. His weapon had been taken from him. Without the plague he no longer had the power to harm the King. But you can live! he told himself. God has let you keep life, so use it! Go back and be a brother to Mercy! How could any sane person mind finding themselves to be well when they had thought themselves to be dying?

Nick turned on his side and curled tight. The tears came and took him over, shuddering him with sobs that clenched every muscle in his body until they hurt. Nick let himself think of Mother. He thought of Father. He turned onto his front and arched his back like an animal in pain and he thumped clenched fists onto the bed.

'Damned King! Bloody man!'

Surely there must still be some way to damage the King, even without the plague? Nick got up.

He went to the window where he leaned on the sill and looked up beyond the walls of the Tower to a sky salted with stars. If he could not harm the King himself, then maybe he could harm the Tower that held the King's power? Nick thought of the ancient White Tower, full of the King's weaponry. He crept back from the window and slipped under his cover, to sleep at last and dream of flying over the great White Tower.