



Chapter Eight

As Nick helped James Robinson to dress the next morning, he asked James, 'Do you think a boy could ever fly?' As soon as he'd said it, Nick realised it wasn't the kind of question a servant should ask his master, but luckily it seemed to interest James. James walked over to the window and looked out.

'To fly would surely require wings,' he said. 'I wonder, could such things be made? Gracious, Raven, we shall have to experiment and see if it might be done!'

'Do you think, Sir, perhaps the birds can show us how?' asked Nick.

'But the stupid things are too far away to see properly,' complained James.

'Well, Sir,' said Nick, feeling bolder. 'I do know of one bird who might come near if we tempted him with a piece of something tasty. Meat is what a raven likes best.'

'Oh, very good!' scorned James, his nose suddenly tilted upwards. 'You cannot fool me with that one! You're talking about yourself, are you not? You are the "raven" who would come close if I offered a good meat pie!'

'No, Sir,' assured Nick. 'This is a real bird that I know. He lives up on the wall of the White Tower.'

James waved a hand towards the window. 'There are scores of ravens. How can you tell one of the wretched things from another?'

'I have met it by the river, and in the lanes.'

'Where you lived?'

'Yes,' said Nick, then he saw the look on James's face and knew that he had told too much of the truth.

'So,' sneered James. 'You are not from the country as you told my mother. You have lived in the lanes after all, and with the plague around!'

'I have lately lived in the west of the city where there is little plague.' That was true. 'I was from the country before that,' said Nick. That was true too. James needn't know how many years went between the two.

'Well,' considered James. 'Show me this bird of yours and then help me to construct some wings,

and I may forget to tell my parents what you have told me.'

'Then the first thing to do is to beg a little meat from Cook,' said Nick.

When Nick called, 'Kraack!' and waved a bit of raw meat at the base of the Tower wall, his raven flew down and then hopped across the courtyard towards the two boys.

'He is bigger than I had thought,' said James, taking a step back. But Nick crouched down and held out the meat and the raven's plumed head snatched and tore at it. James waved a hand, 'Pull open a wing so that we can see how it is structured,' he said.

'No,' said Nick.

'Why ever not?'

Nick didn't want to tell his real reason. The truth was that Devil came to him by choice and if Nick abused that friendship, he knew that the raven might never come close to him again.

James picked up a small stone and threw it at Devil. 'Open your wings, you stupid creature!' The stone missed and the bird didn't flinch but it gave James a withering look. Instantly Nick was on his feet and looking down at his young master.

'You just stay still, Sir!' He glared at James. 'I will ask the bird to fly. Nick turned to Devil. 'Go now!' he said. And Devil bloomed wide his wings, then hopped, hopped and was up into the air, seeming to shrink as he flew up into the sky.

'A structure somewhat like a fan,' observed James, too interested in the science of what he saw to bother with Nick's manners just then.

'That is just how it should be,' said Nick. 'But it will not be an easy thing to achieve.'

They tried to zig-zag some spoiled chart paper that James had been allowed to take from Sir John's office. They folded and turned and folded again until the paper would close down onto itself to make a slim pile that would open out like a wing. 'But it is far too small to hold us up,' said James. 'We should try a cloak. That would be the right sort of a shape. Fetch one.' But somebody else was ordering Nick too.

'Raven!' called Mister Bailey. 'Go to the gardener and fetch a fresh nosegay to my Lady Robinson as quick as can be. My lady is to go out visiting into the city and must be protected from the vapours. Quick, boy!'

When Nick got to Lady Robinson with the posy of herbs and flowers, she asked him, 'Whatever

have you led my son into now? James came asking me just now for the loan of a fan. I hope that he is not thinking of dressing as a girl!

'No, my lady,' assured Nick. 'He is interested in how it can be that birds fly.'

Lady Robinson looked sharply at Nick. 'You mean that you boys are making wings? You are not the first to try that, you know.' She bent plumply towards Nick so that her maid would not hear. 'You might find this hard to believe, young man, but I tried it once myself when I was a girl. I distinctly remember jumping off some steps with a sheet held aloft and flapping like a startled goose. I fell like a stone, of course, and ripped my skirts. Don't smirk, boy! I was not so ample in those days!' She gave Nick a mock cuff over the head. 'So,' she said as she pulled on gloves in spite of the heat of the day, 'I should look to see you taking off from the roof of the White Tower, should I?' She chuckled and wagged a finger at Nick. 'Just you remember that James is Sir John's son, and heir to the Robinson name, as well as being my own precious boy. Shield him from harm, Raven. Do you hear me?' She smiled, put the nosegay to her face and swept out of the room.

'Yes, my lady,' said Nick.

Nick ran back to James's room. 'Master James, Sir, I have another idea for you; one given to me by your mother. We must use sheets to make the wings. A sheet will be lighter than a cloak and much stronger and bigger than paper.'

James curled a lip. 'I have been thinking,' he said. 'It won't work. It can't work. If men could ever fly, then somebody would surely have done it already. They haven't, so clearly it cannot be done.'

'But we can't truly know that unless we try!' said Nick. Here was his chance to get inside the White Tower and to the seat of the King's power.

'It is simple,' said James. 'We cannot be birds and birds cannot be us. Fetch me a drink, Raven.'

Nick's hands clenched tight as he dared to say, 'Of course you are yourself a little like one kind of bird already, Master James.'

'Whatever do you mean?' James frowned.

Nick tucked his fists under his armpits and wagged his elbows. 'You are very like the chicken that has had its wings clipped so that it will never fly!' he said, and he made clucking sounds.

'How dare you!' James's face was red. 'I shall tell my father what you said! I'll ...'

Nick raised one eyebrow. 'Tell your mother what I said?' asked Nick. 'Tell her that you dare

not jump from any small height and try to fly? Yet she told me herself that it is something that she did in her youth. Are you less of a man than your mother, Master James?

James struck his jaw out. 'How dare you!' He tilted back his head, nose pointing upwards. 'I shall jump,' he said. 'Just fetch a sheet and tell me where you would have me jump from and you shall see me do it.' There was a pause. Nick felt a chill of power and evil mixing in him.

'Then jump from the White Tower,' he said. 'Don't be ridiculous, Raven!'

Nick's face softened. 'Not to jump off the Tower, Master James. That would be madness. No. Just to try the sheet in the wind that will be stronger up on the roof there, that is all. It should act like a sail on one of His Majesty's yachts, holding the wind to let the force of that wind power it along. We could feel that power transferred to our arms rather than a boat and try to work out a way to use it for flight. You are not too chicken for that small experiment, surely?'

James shook his head. 'Excellent,' said Nick. 'Then I shall go and fetch the sheet from off your bed, Sir.'

'At once, please, Raven!'