



Chapter Nine

Short, plump James led the way to the White Tower. Tall dark skinny Nick hurried behind, carrying the bundle of sheet across the hot open space between the house and the Tower. Nick had a tight feeling in his throat now that they were about to enter the White Tower. He had no plan what to do when he got inside. I will see what is there and what can be done, he thought. Will they let two boys into such a place? But the soldiers guarding the Tower nodded respectfully to James Robinson, the son of their Lord Lieutenant. They stood aside to let the boys through the door.

Nick stepped into the cool inside of the stone building and he followed James up spiral stairs, up and up past men busy cleaning muskets; men who looked up, but never questioned or stopped the boys. Nick lingered and looked around and saw other guns and swords and pikes stacked, but what could he do to those? Snatch one and

be jumped upon and arrested and no harm at all done to the King? If only I could get near to his jewels, he thought. Then I could take the crown that marks the man as the King anointed by God. What would God think of such an action?

'Hurry up, Raven!'

James was puffing as he climbed the stairs, around and up, floor after floor. Nick passed James and led the way upwards, suddenly eager to get out onto the high open rooftop. He stepped onto the griddle heat of the flat lead roof high above London, where a warm breeze gently buffeted over the low parapet walls. Nick's quest for a wind to fly sheet wings and his hunger for the King's jewels were suddenly forgotten as he stood still in the slightly salty air that blew from the east. He put down the sheet and leaned over the parapet.

'Look at that!' He turned to James. 'It is as though I'm looking down on one of your father's maps, except that this map lives and moves. See that carriage moving along Tower Street? And that man on horseback? They have no idea that they are being watched!'

Nick walked to look over all four sides of the Tower, looking down on the river, the boats, the

dockyards, and on to the fields and villages and a distant glimmer of sun on the sea. He felt himself to be suddenly grown big and strong because the world seemed to have shrunk below his feet. Beside him, James too seemed to have forgotten what they had come up here for.

'You know, Raven,' said James, 'This tower was built with blood mixed into its mortar to make it most particularly strong. It has been fortress and home to every king of this land for hundreds and hundreds of years. Old Nolly Cromwell took it for his mob, of course, but ...'

'I wish Mercy could see this,' said Nick as he looked beyond London to the green countryside. He would like to take Mercy to that open country place of clean air and no plague. I would take her away from London and never return, he thought.

'Mercy? Who is Mercy for goodness' sake?' asked James.

'She is my sister,' said Nick. 'She was very cross when I saw her last.' Nick pointed between the stone uprights of the parapet towards the messy mass of the city. 'She is living over there,' he said. 'With a friend.'

'Why not with your parents?' asked James. But

Nick didn't want to reveal more, and fortunately James saw something else to interest him. 'Look at them!' he laughed. 'They have a deal to learn about marching!'

Nick looked down and saw something that brought the blood hammering hot inside his head once more. A line of pressed men were being pushed and bullied towards the parade ground by soldiers. Men in chains, shuffling in fear, just as Father must have done. Nick's fists clenched tight, but James was already bored with laughing at the men and was back onto the subject of Mercy.

'If we can see where your sister is, then surely she could also see us,' he said.

'She doesn't know that I am here,' muttered Nick. 'This is the last place she would think to see me.'

'Then we should signal to her,' said James. 'Signal as the navy ships signal to each other, with flags.'

'Flags?' said Nick, suddenly paying attention. He looked at the pale sheet crumpled on the roof and thought of seeing that sheet flying boldly from the roof of the White Tower for all of London to see. A white flag: a message of surrender. Here, suddenly, was a chance to truly damage the King!

Surrendering to the Dutch would bring an end to the war, an end to the need to press men into service in the King's navy, an end to at least one kind of killing that the King inflicted on his people. 'Go on then, Master James,' said Nick. 'Hoist the sheet aloft and let it wave in the wind to my sister.'

James took two corners of the sheet and he lifted his arms and flapped the thing as a washerwoman would, but with less skill.

'Nobody will see that!' scoffed Nick. 'It isn't high enough to be seen above the parapet!'

James turned a darker pink. 'Then perhaps you would like to show how it could be raised higher, Nicholas Raven? Since you are such friends with the birds. Or maybe it is you who are the chicken after all?' James thrust the sheet into Nick's hands. 'Climb that turret and tie the sheet to the pinnacle, I tell you. Or don't you dare?' James tilted his head back and sneeringly stared at Nick. He pointed to the salt-pot-shaped corner turret made of stone topped with a lead cap and a pinnacle. 'You are my servant, Raven, and I order you to do it.'

And suddenly it made perfect sense to Nick to do exactly that. He flapped open the sheet and put a corner of it between his teeth to leave his hands

free as he stepped up onto the parapet and reached for the stonework of the turret. He hugged around the hard corner of the turret's wall, clinging like a baby monkey to its mother, and he began to inch upwards and away from the foothold of the parapet.

Nick's mouth was dry from the sheet soaking up his spittle. He felt the cool strength of the stone that he clung to. He felt the empty nothingness of the air all around. And he looked up at the sheer stone wall to the blue sky beyond. The metal pinnacle was out of sight now, but Nick knew it was there, if only he could cling on and go upwards all that way. There was nothing to hold onto apart from the corner of the wall itself and it took every bit of Nick's concentration to clasp tight hold of the hard smooth stone. Almost instantly his legs began shaking weakly, feverishly.

'Krack!'

A tatty black shape was silhouetted against the sun as Devil landed to perch on the roof cap above Nick, like a dark angel. Help me, Devil, thought Nick desperately.

'Come down, you fool!' called James from below.

Nick clasped the stone walls with his knees,

pushing upwards and reaching for a new handhold. But there was nothing for a hand to hold on to now. A strange slow cool calmness poured through Nick like chilled cream. He felt himself detaching from his own body, looking down on the dark boy perched perilously high, with a white sheet billowing like material breath from his mouth. If I am looking down on myself, then am I rising, wondered Nick? On my way to Heaven to be with Mother and Father? Then another thought hit him like a mallet. Mercy, still down there in the plague-ridden streets and with no family left at all if Nick were to go. Instantly, Nick plunged back into the body whose finger tips were screaming with the pain of holding onto smooth stone, his legs straining with the agony of it. Then the breeze suddenly tugged at the sheet, flapping it, pulling Nick over and away from the stone.

'Krack!'

'Oh, do take care, Raven!' called James. 'Get down, I tell you!'

Nick's grasping fingers touched nothing at all now and he was tipping out over the long drop and he knew very well that he could not fly. But James's hand grabbed hard at his arm and tumbled

him the other way, to land crashing, hurting, but safe onto the wonderfully solid hot lead roof. 'Good Lord, Raven,' said James as he looked down on Nick. 'You do realise that you very nearly died just then?'

'Yes, thank you, Sir,' whispered Nick.