Raven Boy

Pippa Goodhart

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In a tight-packed house fug-full of sleeping people, their smells and their snores and shouts, a tall boy tipped out of bed and climbed up into the attic to throw open the casement to lean out and breathe in the cooler air from outside. Nick looked up from the dark crowded lane cramped with homes, up to the moon-silvered sky where the ravens were flying. In the daytime those birds flew and worked alone. But on hot summer nights they swarmed together and flew in circles, like dancers, thought Nick. Or like witches, casting spells. They writhed and whirled up and up over their Tower-of-London home, and Nick watched them and wondered. Seth had told him that there had almost always been ravens at the Tower, always for hundreds of years until the people of England cut off their king's head. When that king went, so too did the ravens, and they didn't return until the new king came to the throne. Why had the birds stayed away just then, wondered Nick. And why did they ever come back? If he was a raven he would fly away and away and never come back.

Chapter One

London was hot. So hot that the air shimmered like water. Even the flies buzzing over the stinking rubbish in the lane seemed to buzz more lazily than usual. Seth Binder wiped a rag over his damp forehead as he stood in the doorway of the timber and wattle house. He called out,

'Are you coming, Nick? Do you want a day's work or not?'

There were muffled thumps and noises within the cramped darkness inside, and at last a skinny, dark-haired boy came clattering down the stairs. He was frowning.

'What's up?' asked Seth.

'Mother,' said Nick. 'She fell and she has a headache and she's hot …'

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‘We’re all hot!’ laughed Seth. ‘And we’ll get even hotter as the day goes on, so hurry up and let’s get going before we bake in the midday sun.’

There were sounds from up above – moans and another thump – and Nick and Seth glanced upward. Seth’s laughter stopped.

‘You don’t think it might be the plague, do you, Nick? There’s more dying of it every day, they say. We’ve nailed up a family in Fenchurch Street now and I saw a man yesterday fall where he stood, and none to help him. You don’t think …’ He took a step back from the doorway and put a hand over his mouth to block out the smelly fug of the house. Mistress Jenkins came bustling down the stairs, pinning up her hair as she came. She cuffed Nick over the head as she swept past him and raised a wagging finger at the man in the doorway.

‘What’s this talk of plague, Seth Binder? In my house? Never! And don’t you go spreading any such gossip!’ She turned to Nick. ‘Best way you can help your mother is to go and earn a day’s wages to put towards the rent. It’s worry that’s making her ill, I’m sure of it. Now, take a bite of lunch with you, and go.’

‘But what about Mercy?’ asked Nick.

‘I’ll keep your sister from bothering your mother, if that’s what’s on your mind. Your mother needs rest. Mercy can be of use to me down here. She can take the stones from the raisins ready for the baking. She’ll like that.’ Mistress Jenkins reached over the wooden table and dipped a hand into the bread crock. She tore off a hunk of bread which she wrapped hastily in a cloth and handed to Nick to push into his pouch. ‘Now go off out with Master Binder, Nicholas Truelove. And I want to hear of no idle gossip from either of you concerning illness at my boarding house, if you please. It’s hard enough to find lodgers in these troubled times.’

So Nick stepped out from the indoor smells of washing soaking and overnight piss pots, and into the lane.

‘You can carry this,’ said Seth, so Nick took the heavy bundle of tools and followed Seth downhill, dodging over dusty rubbish that needed a good rain shower to flush the lane clean.

‘Where’s the job?’ asked Nick.

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‘A repair at Tower Wharf,’ said Seth. ‘The tide’s out so the timbers should be high and dry.’

Good, thought Nick. He liked the broad brown silky river and the boats that came and went on it carrying goods and people. But there was something next to the river that Nick did not like. As they walked nearer, Nick looked up at the great Tower of London that rose up with a mass of towers pointing skywards within great stone walls. That walled and moated fortress was the place that held the King’s power. It was where the King kept his jewels and his weapons, his soldiers and his prisoners. It was where they had taken Father.

The press men had taken Nick’s father one night as he was out delivering a pair of gloves to a gentleman customer. They had taken Father to the Tower in chains and forced him to become a sailor on one of the King’s warships. Then they had sent Father out to sea in a ship to be fired at by Dutch cannons so that the ship burnt and sank and Father never came home again. Nick clenched his fists. The King is a murderer, he thought. The King killed Father, and he took our home too, and my life. Because they’d had to leave their home, without Father to earn their living. Nick had had to leave his school and take work where he could, usually with parish carpenter, Seth Binder.

‘Stop moon-beaming and concentrate,’ said Seth. ‘See that broken spar there? We need to cut out the rotten part and splice in a new piece of oak.’

‘Then we’ll want the saw, won’t we?’ asked Nick, opening out the roll of tools.

‘That’s it,’ said Seth. ‘Now, you get down into that mud. Don’t look at me like that, boy. It’ll be lovely and cool between your toes! Now, grab your end of the saw. Wrap a leather round your hand as I’ve shown you before. Your hands are as soft as a baby’s.’

‘They are not!’

‘Use the leather!’ said Seth.

The sawing did make Nick’s hands sore, and his feet stuck in the thick stony mud, and his back ached. But there was a satisfaction in sawing back and forth with Seth, cutting away the rotten timber ready to replace it with new. Then Nick climbed

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out of the mud to work on the new wood, and he was glad of the mud's cooling dampness on his legs in the hot sunshine. Beside him, the river slap-slopped and in the distance there were the sounds of boats and shouting and horses on cobbles and the great water wheel churning under the bridge. Seth pared at a corner of the wood with a knife in the same way that Mother would pare a turnip for the pot. Nick whittled pegs to fix the wood in place.

As the sun rose high overhead, Seth went to quench his thirst in the ale-house, leaving Nick with the lunch in his pouch. He sat beside a mooring post and watched two seagulls having a tug-of-war over a scrap of fish. Their screeching meant that they opened their beaks and dropped the fish, and while they flapped furiously at each other, a big black raven scrambled across and pinched the fish from beside their feet. Nick laughed.

'You! Boy there! Take the rope!' shouted a gentleman's voice from the river. 'Quickly, boy! Gracious, have the young no respect for their betters these days?'

A rope hit Nick around the head, and he reached out and took it as a silk-stockinged foot in a fine buckled shoe stepped onto the quay. Nick jumped up and bowed his head a little as a grand figure stepped from the rowing boat that had slipped so silently alongside the wharf. As Nick straightened up again, he saw the gentleman from feet upwards. Plum-coloured silk stockings went up into frilled breeches and a stomach as plump as a pillow wrapped around with a wine-coloured velvet coat worked with golden stitched flowers. It was a very fine coat, but it was making the gentleman hot, and so was the big grey wig that tumbled curls around the gentleman's fatly sneering face. Nick looked the gentleman straight in the eye and he didn't blink.

'Insolence!' said the gentleman, and he turned and waddled towards the entrance to the Tower.

Nick knew who the grand man was. He was Sir John Robinson, Lord Lieutenant of His Majesty's Tower of London, and in charge of prisoners and pressed men taken on the King's orders. Nick would like to capture the King and send <i>him<i*> into the Tower to be tortured or sent out to the great deep lonely sea to be shot at and drowned. Nick gathered phlegm in his mouth and he spat it towards the back of that grand man who did the King's dirty work.

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Then Nick took the bread from his pouch. He chewed it moodily and scowled after Sir John Robinson as he went within the great walls of the Tower. But something sharp suddenly attacked Nick's bare leg.

'Hey!'

Nick hopped backwards, dropping the bread from his hand. A big black raven tweaked up the bread in its beak, tipped back its head and swallowed.

'You thieving devil!' said Nick, part angry, part amused. The raven had a distinctive tuft of feathers standing up from its head. It was a young raven, not yet fully grown. It was the same raven that had taken the fish from the seagulls. 'You've robbed my lunch!' said Nick.

But the bird had brought payment for the meal. It had dropped something small and shiny and circular onto the dusty quayside before snatching Nick's bread. Now Nick bent and picked the thing up. It was a button. Nick looked at the raven, its head on one side and its eyes shining back at Nick. 'Where did you get this from?' asked Nick.

'Kraack!'

'From that gentleman who passed by just now?' Nick grinned. He spat on the button and rubbed it clean on his shirt. 'Silver!' The button had a shape of flowers standing proud on the surface. Nick glanced around to check that nobody was watching, then he slipped the button into his breeches pocket.

'I'm not the thief here,' he told the bird. 'You've done the robbery. I'm just accepting your payment.' The raven blinked slowly.

The bird stayed beside Nick and watched as he got back to work, whittling pegs. The raven's head nodded, following each strike of the knife as Nick shaped the peg to fit the hole. 'Is it the shine of it that you like?' asked Nick. 'Well, you can't have the knife, you know. It belongs to Seth.'

'It certainly does. Give it back to me please, Master Nick.'

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Seth had beery breath and was in a good mood. He nodded in the direction of the raven. ‘Daft bird,’ he said.

‘He’s not daft, he’s clever,’ said Nick.

‘Oh, yes? Horrible birds, ravens; they live their lives by feeding off others. They’re parasites, that’s what they are. Very devils. They’ll have your eyes out, given half a chance. You must’ve seen them following the death carts and pecking at corpses.’ Seth made a face. ‘I hate them.’

‘That’s no worse than how the King lives,’ said Nick. ‘He takes from others, even their lives sometimes.’

Seth put a hasty finger to his mouth. ‘You hush, Nick! That’s dangerous talk, especially in an open place like this where there’s people that can hear you. And next to the King’s own Tower! I know how you feel about what happened to your father, but there’s no happiness to be found in hating the King for that. Best settle for life the way that it is. We’ve all of us had our hardships, and we’ll no doubt have more before we’re finished. Now, are we going to get this job done or not?’ Seth took the peg that Nick had shaped, looked at it critically, then began to hammer it into place.

Nick watched the big bird lift his wings and rise up into the air, up and away from the hot quayside. The air must be cooler higher up, thought Nick; cool and fresh as country stream water. Nick sighed and picked up the plane to shave the tops of the pegs level with the wharf.

‘I wish I was a raven,’ said Nick.

‘What nonsense are you talking now?’ asked Seth. Nick didn’t answer, but he thought how wonderful it would be to be able to fly away from life in London’s streets whenever he chose.

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