



Chapter Two

When Nick got back to the boarding house in Farthing Lane, Mistress Jenkins opened the door, looked up and down the lane, then pulled Nick inside. She slammed the door shut and spoke close into Nick's face. 'Your mother, Nicholas! She's bad, writhing and moaning and vomiting and talking nonsense and I hardly dare let myself think what I am thinking!'

'And what are you thinking?' asked Nick, although he knew.

'I fear that the you-know-what has come amongst us at last, Nicholas. The plague into my own house!' said Mistress Jenkins. 'I want your mother out of this place, and nobody to know of it, or they'll come and nail us all in to die of it. You must take your mother away from here, Nicholas! I beg you!'

'Take her where?'

'Anywhere! Away! To the Pest House, I suppose.'

'No!'

Nick wrenched himself free of Mistress Jenkins's bony grasp and he ran up the stairs to his Mother. He opened the door to the small room that they rented. Then he stopped still, halted by the sounds and smells from within. He took a deep breath, and stepped towards the bed.

'Mother?' asked Nick almost shyly. The woman who lay in front of him didn't seem to be the same mother he knew so well. Her pink face with hair neatly tucked into a crisp white cap had become pale and wild. It was so tight with pain that Nick could see the skull very near the surface of her skin. She was grey as dough. Her brown hair was crumpled around her head, her body twisted in sheets wet with sweat. Nick reached out a hand and he touched his mother's forehead. It was clammy chill. Mother smelt foul and Nick didn't like to breathe near her. But his mother's pale bony hand suddenly wavered up towards him. Nick took it.

'Mother?'

'Nic...' began his mother, but the effort to form his name was too much.

'Yes, Mother?' he whispered.

'Mer...'

'Mercy, yes? I shall care for her always, Mother. I promise it.'

But Nick's mother wanted to say more.

'Yes?' whispered Nick.

'Bury her.' Mother's eyes were wild, but her speech suddenly clear. 'Bury Mercy. With me.'

'No!' Nick flung down his mother's hand. He looked to the doorway and saw his small sister standing there, shaking and big-eyed with the thought of being put into a hole in the ground together with the corpse of their mother, covered with soil until there was only darkness and no air and... Nick went and pulled Mercy to him and held her tight. 'Don't you fear, Mercy. I shall keep you safe.'

'Oh, Nicholas!' Mistress Jenkins was on the staircase, wailing her fear, scared to get close to the illness but too afraid of sickness to ignore it. 'We have to know for sure. Pull back your mother's shift and take a look for the signs of plague, and I pray it won't be there!'

Nick swallowed. 'I will, but only if you take Mercy downstairs and away from here. Only if...'

Mistress Jenkins was suddenly angry, finger pointing. 'You are in no position to tell me what to do in my own house, young man.'

'Oh?' said Nick, fierce back. 'Then shall I shout up the stairs to Mr Treter and the Webber family? Shall I open the window and shout into the lane that this house is a plague house?'

'No, Nicholas!' Mistress Jenkins's hands shuddered either side of her cheeks. 'Oh, you musn't, I beg you! I shall take Mercy down directly.'

Nick gently pushed Mercy out through the door, and the old woman led her down the stairs.

Nick closed his eyes. Please God, he thought, let us all be mistaken and it isn't the plague after all. He turned his head away from his mother and took a breath. Then he turned back and pulled open the damp neck of Mother's nightgown. Nothing to see. Nick bit his lip. He tugged the gown down over Mother's right shoulder. And there it was; a great purple swelling blooming under the armpit. Nick felt his stomach heave. His heart was thumping in his ears. 'Oh, dear God!' His mother moaned, and Nick fled, wiping and wiping his hands on his breeches as he went.

Nick went to the kitchen where Mistress Jenkins was on her knees, praying.

'Good Lord have mercy...'

Nick looked at his small sister, crumpled in

a corner and with her hands over her ears. She looked frail as paper. Nick knew she hadn't the strength to survive if the plague ever got into her.

'Mercy' he said gently, pulling her hands away from her ears. 'We shall go from here.'

Mercy looked up at him. 'But, what of Mother?'

'Mother is gone from us,' said Nick, and Mercy's eyes and mouth opened big in her white face. 'We must go.' He quickly snatched a hunk of bread from a plate on the table and the leftover mutton on a bone that sat in a bowl, and he wrapped them all in a cloth left drying by the fire. He checked that he had his knife safe on a cord from his waist.

'What are you doing, Nicholas?' Mistress Jenkins struggled to her feet. 'That's my food. You cannot leave me with your mother! Nicholas!'

Nick took Mercy's hand. But Mistress Jenkins grabbed hold of Mercy's other arm. 'Don't go, Nicholas! Don't leave me with your mother up there!'

'Let her go!' said Nick fiercely. He tugged Mercy free of the woman, then opened the door and hurried out into the lane, pushing a protesting Mercy before him.

There were people in the lane, two women standing and talking, but they stepped back into their homes as Nick and Mercy ran by. They already know, thought Nick. They'll gossip it up and down the lanes and it won't be long before somebody calls for the searcher to come, and then nobody can escape.

'Nick? Where are we going?'

'Away,' said Nick.

'Where?' sobbed Mercy. 'Nick!'

'Shush!' Nick wished he knew where to go.

At the end of the lane he stopped. The sound of Mother's moans filled his head so that he couldn't think.

'I want to go home!' said Mercy.

Home; where Mother lay dying. Where the searcher would come in his long black gown and bird-head mask to swoop up the stairs and loom over Mother and summon the death cart and the men with long hooked poles. Nick swallowed something that heaved up inside him. He had seen the next bit happen to a neighbour. The body tossed onto a cart full of bodies that had been people. The flies buzzing. The smell. No prayer or headstone to mark the dead person thrown into a plague pit like any other rubbish. Nick clenched

Mercy's small hand tight. They would nail tight shut the door to Mistress Jenkins's house. They would seal everyone inside for forty days and nights and the likelihood was that plague would take them all.

'Run!' Nick hauled Mercy through the lanes and away from that horror.

That was how it had been for London's people for the last two years – people dying and the city dying with them. There was grass along the streets now. Few shops were open, few stalls set up or counters put down. Few physicians or churchmen were left in the city to care for the sick. Those who could had fled. Hardly any of the grand people were left.

That thought suddenly gave Nick an idea of where he could take Mercy to keep her safe. The great houses belonging to the rich people who had gone must be empty. Nick smiled down at Mercy. 'I'll take you to a place that you'll like very much,' he told her.

He hurried her along the narrow lanes shaded by the overhanging storeys of the houses on either side. They left the looming Tower and Farring Lane and Mother far behind them as they went westwards, towards the setting sun. They hurried

past St Paul's and along The Strand, to streets where the evening sun cast big shadows from grand houses sitting within walled gardens.

'We'll live in one of these places,' Nick told Mercy.

'But we've not been invited!' said Mercy. 'And my face is dirty. Mother wouldn't...'

'We won't go in through a front door, nor even through the servants' entrance,' said Nick. 'No one will see whether we are dirty or clean. We'll set up home in secret. Here.' Nick dodged down an alley-way that ran beside one big house. There were shutters over all the windows as if the house was asleep and had its eyes closed. 'Now, hush and do as I say.' Nick looked over his shoulder to check that nobody was watching. Then he jumped up to grab and pull himself up to sit astride the wall.

'Now reach up, Mercy. I'm going to pull you over.'

Mercy was only six years old and slight. Nick, at twelve, could easily lift her. For a moment they perched on the wall like two clumsy birds holding on tight and looking all around.

'Oh!' whispered Mercy, looking at the garden. 'It's like the Garden of Eden from the Bible!'

The garden had apple and plum trees with some

fruit still on them. There were beds of the last of the summer's roses.

'Oh, look, Nick!' whispered Mercy. There was a gardener with a rake in this garden too.

'Get down!' whispered Nick, ducking and pushing Mercy low on the wall. He twisted and dropped quietly down into the garden to crouch behind a quince, then watched and waited until he was sure that the gardener had turned his back before he reached up to take Mercy from the wall. She was trembling. 'Don't fear,' he whispered. 'The house will be empty and all ours.'