



## Chapter Four

Nick woke, sweating and shaking. Which doesn't make sense, he thought. You shake when you are cold and sweat when you are hot, and you can't be both at once, can you? The first grey light of morning dimly revealed the inside of the cellar as it shone through the open door. Mercy was still hunched in exhausted sleep on the floor, but Nick sat up, and he felt the cellar spin around him. He got onto his knees, then pushed up onto shaky legs. The cellar floor reared up and hit him and he lay on its hard gritty surface and didn't know whether he was on the ceiling looking down or on the floor looking up. A thought struck him, sharp as a dagger; Mother had staggered and clutched and fallen when the plague first entered her. Is that what's happening to me now, thought Nick? Have I brought the plague with us? Nick's mind spun like a Catherine wheel. He suddenly heaved and was very sick into a corner of the

cellar, then lay down on the gritty floor, clammy and shaking.

Mercy! he thought. What would happen to Mercy if he died? She would be alone with his corpse in this dark cellar. Then she would fall ill with plague too and ... No! He must go from Mercy; run now and take the danger away from her. But that would leave her alone! Mercy was stirring, and Nick's mind sharpened into a plan. He knew that he mustn't let Mercy know that he was ill. It would scare her too much. He must take her and just leave her somewhere safe, very soon, while he could still walk. Who could care for Mercy? Mistress Jenkins? Everything that Nick and Mercy owned was in Mistress Jenkins's house, but that house would be nailed shut by now. No. They must go to Seth Binder and his good wife Pegg.

'Mercy!' Nick was sharp because he must get her to move and he dare not touch her. 'Mercy, you are to get up at once and climb out of the cellar.'

'What's that smell? Where ...'

'Hurry!'

'Again?'

'Again, but for the last time, I promise.'

Mercy rubbed bleary eyes and got stiffly to her feet. 'Where are we going now?

'To pay a visit to Master Binder.'

'Master Binder who you work for?'

'That's it. You know Mistress Binder who gave you a skirt that once belonged to their little girl that drowned? We will go and visit her and I dare say she might give us a bite of breakfast.'

Mercy got slowly to her feet. 'Can't we stay here awhile? My feet are sore.'

'No we can't,' said Nick. 'Now get up through that door. Keep low and run to the gate. I shall be just behind.'

'Bossy!' said Mercy, but she did it. Thank God for that, thought Nick.

Being sick had eased the pain in Nick's stomach, but it left him feeling dizzy. Mercy mustn't see how I am, thought Nick. Nor Seth or he won't let us into his house. Nick took a deep breath. All I must do is get Mercy to Seth's house, and then she will be safe.

Mercy held out a hand to Nick and looked pleadingly up at him. But Nick folded his arms.

'You're too old for holding hands!' he told her. 'Can you not walk a bit faster?' Nick felt horribly weak. Keep angry to keep strong, he told himself.

So he thought of the deaths that the King had brought upon the Truelove family – Father, then Mother, and now him. Nick bunched his fists tight. 'Move!' he told Mercy, and she glared back at him.

'I hate you, Nicholas Truelove!'

'Good,' said Nick. 'Now go faster.'

Mercy had tears streaking her dirty face and her bottom lip was quivering by the time they reached the small house where the Binders lived. Seth's door was already open to the early heat of the day. Nick could see inside to a table spread with a cloth. There was a jug and a loaf of bread and a pot with Michaelmas daisies in it. It all looked clean and there was a chair with a welcoming lap that Nick longed to slump into, but he must not. He must not appear tired or ill at all, not if he was going to persuade the Binders to care for Mercy. Nick steadied his breathing, then he knocked on the door.

'Master Binder?'

There were footsteps. Somebody was at home.

'Nick? And young Mercy, is it?' Seth was frowning. 'Your mother, Mistress Truelove, I heard ...' Nick saw distress and alarm in the man's eyes and he could see that Seth didn't know what

to do, but then Pegg came bustling to the door.

'Never mind what you heard or didn't hear, Seth Binder,' she told her husband. 'It's what you see with your own eyes that surely counts for more.'

Pegg Binder, pleasantly plump and carrying a pile of freshly washed linen, dumped the pile of linen into Seth's arms and came straight to Mercy. 'Gracious, man, can you not see that this little girl is in need of care? And just the same age as our Lucy when we lost her. How can you stand there idling?' Pegg put an arm around Mercy and scooped her into the house. 'Sit yourself down, my love, and I'll get you some of my barley water to drink. Your brother could do with some too, I dare say. Then you tell me what these tears are all about, eh?'

I should go now, thought Nick. Mercy is safe and I mustn't bring plague into the Binders' house or I will spoil it all. But Pegg was pouring barley water into pewter beakers and Nick's dry mouth felt like the dusty parched earth of the lanes outside.

'Here,' Pegg pressed a beaker into his hands as he stood awkwardly in the doorway. 'Come in and sit down and never mind Master Binder. You've come to see if Seth has more work for you, I dare say?'

'No,' said Nick. 'I thank you.' He tried to steady his shaking hands as they lifted the beaker and he drank, gulping down the cool liquid.

'My word, you do have a thirst!' said Pegg. She came at him, reaching out a hand to touch his hot forehead, but Seth gently took his wife's arm and steered her through a door and into the back room. 'Oh!' said Pegg. 'Excuse us a moment, would you?' The door closed, but Nick could hear a whispered argument between them. Seth was telling Pegg that it was too dangerous to take in children of a mother dead of the plague. But Pegg is kind, thought Nick. Surely she won't turn away Mercy, not if Mercy is on her own? I must go.

'Mercy?' whispered Nick.

'What is it?' Mercy wiped her face and scowled at Nick.

'I have a present for you.' Nick reached into his pocket and took out the silver button that the raven had given him only yesterday, though that seemed a distant time ago now. He threw the button carefully and Mercy instinctively put out her hands and caught it. She held the button between finger and thumb and tilted it in the light. Her eyes opened wide.

'It's silver,' said Nick. 'It is worth a deal of money.'

'Did you steal it?' whispered Mercy.  
'No,' said Nick. 'It was given me by a friend. Now keep it safe and don't tell anybody of it. If you need to, you can sell it or exchange it. Do you understand?'

Mercy stroked a finger over the button and smiled for the first time that day. 'I know just the place to hide it,' she said. 'I'll sew it onto my bodice. That has a button missing.'

'Then everybody will see it, you goose!' said Nick.

'Goose yourself,' said Mercy. 'I'll cover it. I shall take a snippet of cloth from the hem of my skirt and wrap it around the button and nobody will know that it's special.'

Nick smiled. 'You're a clever girl, Mercy. And a good sister. And ...' There was the clatter of Seth lifting the latch on the door from the back room. Nick turned and ran, out of Shoe Lane, out of their sight. And out of Mercy's life.