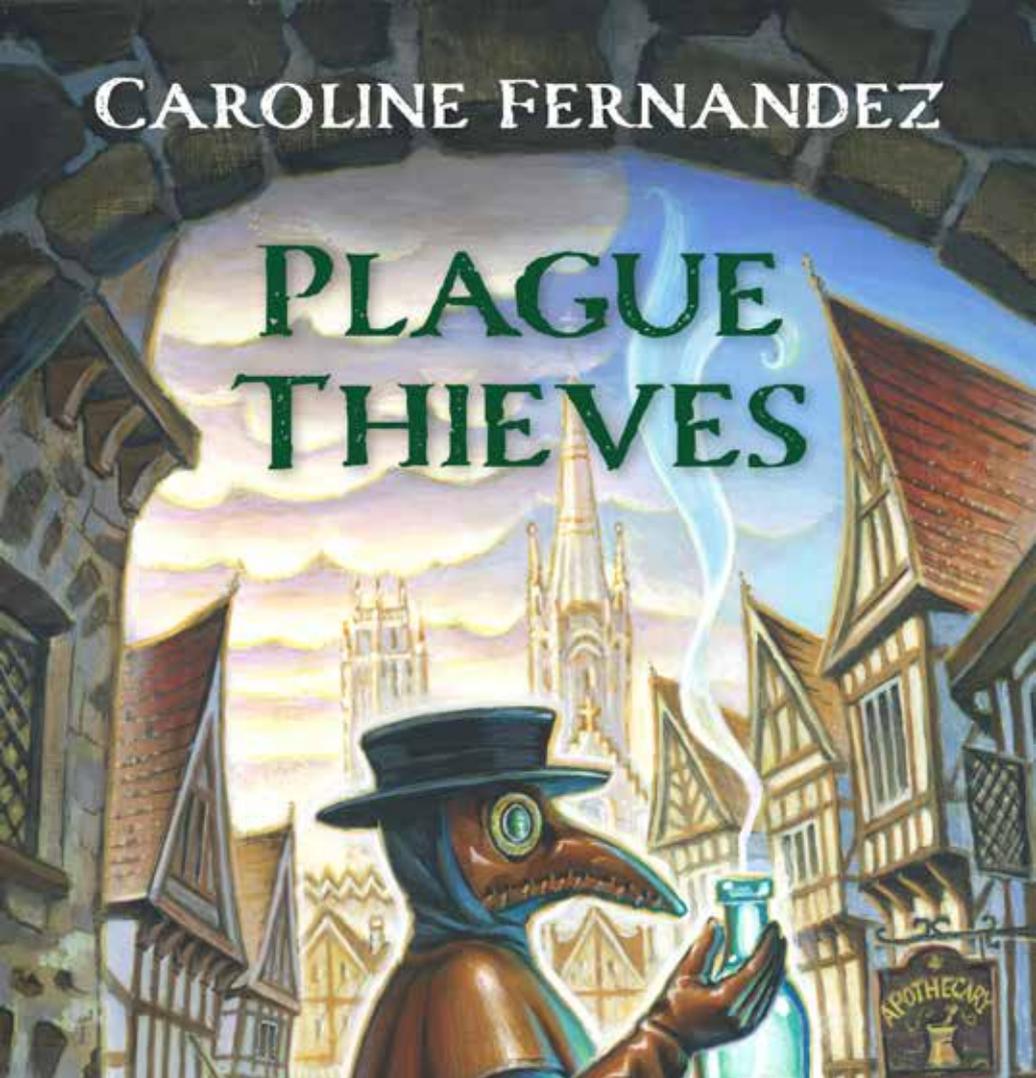


CAROLINE FERNANDEZ

# PLAGUE THIEVES



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FERNANDEZ

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*For all the Jacks in the world*



## BEFORE THE ILLNESS

Before the illness, my life was normal. Very normal, for a twelve-year-old girl living in London in the year 1665.

Every morning, I woke up at long before sunrise.. I left the comfort of my straw bed and readied myself for the day. I took off my nightgown, folded it, and put it under my straw pillow. Then I got dressed.

My linen smock felt soft next to my skin. Over top of my smock, I wore my dress. I was fortunate because I had two dresses. One was linen, the color of oatmeal. The other was a cotton Mother had dyed with tea leaves. My boots and leggings were the color of coffee beans. I tucked my long hair into my cream-colored cap. It fit close to my head and kept me extra warm in the winter but in the summer it was hot.

After dressing, I went to the kitchen. Mother and I were always the first ones up because we had to start breakfast. Father and Lem appeared once the delicious smells of freshly baked bread filled our apartment. Mother and I served breakfast to Father and Lem. Bread with butter and a sprinkle of sage. We each drank a small

cup of ale to wash it down. After breakfast, I would help Mother with the dishes. Father and Lem would go downstairs to prepare for receiving shipments. After breakfast, Father opened the spice shop.

Most days, Lem was in a bad mood when he did his chores. He had to load and unload heavy bags of spice to and from the merchants' wagons. It was heavy work to lug the large bags in and out of the store. Lem hated it.

He got into the habit of sneaking off after the morning merchants had come and gone.

"That boy!" Father would mutter.

"It's just a phase," Mother would reply. Then they would turn their backs and whisper.

"It's not a phase! He's in with that gang of boys. I'm sure they are up to no good at all. It's only a matter of time before he ends up in jail ... or worse."

"He will change, sweetheart. Just give him time."

"He should be here. Learning the business. This will all be his one day!"

"Hush, Rose will hear."

That was always the end of the conversation. It never went further for fear *Rose will hear*. I wondered if they were being protective of me ... or if they just didn't want to make a decision on what to do about my brother.

Lem wasn't always like this. He used to like working in the shop. I guess to a twelve-year-old the spice shop was an opportunity to learn, but to a sixteen-year-old it was a prison.

Mother and I swept the shop floors every day. We brushed up the grains of spices that sometimes spilled to the floor when Father showed his stock to merchants. I happily watched him as he negotiated prices with the merchants, weighed out spice on his measuring scale, and recorded figures in his great leather-bound ledger. The wooden shelves, from floor to ceiling, held bags of spices from the Far East and Europe.

Eucalyptus leaves that smelled like a forest. Pepper that made me sneeze. Nutmeg that was sweet and spicy. Ginger, cardamom, mace, and more. These scents were all so familiar to me.

At noon Mother and I would go upstairs to prepare the pottage for lunch. Most days it was cabbage soup with barley or oats. On special occasions, like a birthday, Mother added bacon.

After lunch, Mother stayed in our apartment and took to her spinning wheel for the afternoon. Lem told me she spun the wool for extra money. Maybe that was true, but I also know she loved spinning. When she spun wool, she smiled. Mother had the most beautiful smile.

Some afternoons, if Mother didn't need my help with spinning or washing, I was allowed to go back downstairs to the shop. The shop was my favorite place. Father was teaching me to do the inventory. I carefully counted bags of spice and recorded the figures in his ledger. Father had taught Lem and me both to read and do sums.

"Lem should be doing the inventory," Father said.

"I like doing it," I replied.

“Perhaps when the shop belongs to Lem — he will let you do inventory. You are quite accurate with your counting and your handwriting is better than mine,” said Father.

“Or the shop will belong to *me* — and Lem will do the inventory!” I suggested.

I loved the idea of being the spice shop owner.

“But, alas, Rose, women do not own spice shops. Women marry spice merchants. Or men crazy enough to open a spice shop.” He winked at me as he said this. I winked back, knowing this was the truth of my future.

I enjoyed discovering where spices came from and what they smelled like. Father had learned through books and sailors’ stories how certain spices held secrets. He revealed these mysteries of spice to me when we were alone in the shop. Father always knew just what spice you needed. Whether it was something for cooking or if you had a headache or an upset stomach. Some spices were used as medicines. Some spices were used for cleaning. Father would show me maps of where the spices came from and the trade routes that brought them to our little shop in London.

He taught me the difference between mixing dry spices and making an oil blend. We make essential oils by boiling and simmering spices or herbs for hours. During this process, oil floats to the top of the pot. We collect the oil, pour it into bottles, and keep them separated on the top shelf.

Lem might be the heir to Father’s shop, but I was the beneficiary of his knowledge.

Salt was used to preserve meat and fish. Sugar made cakes taste sweet. Cardamom helped to prevent bad breath. Saffron cured headaches and fainting fits.

We closed the shop at sunset. When the door was locked to the outside world, we would go upstairs to our apartment. In the sitting room, Father took to his chair and read the newspaper. I helped Mother in the kitchen to prepare supper. The meal was another pottage with boiled vegetables. The ingredients depended on what was in season at the market. Usually Mother used leeks, onions, or carrots.

When it was time for bed, I undressed and put on my nightgown. I rinsed my mouth with vinegar to clean my teeth. Then, I crawled back into my straw bed to sleep.

Mother and Father would go to their bed after Father finished his evening tobacco.

Lem didn't always come home in time for supper, but Mother always kept a bowl for him.

Life was good. Normal. Safe. Happy.

Then, in spring, the sickness crept into London.

One day, Mother went to the market alone. At supper, we all noticed she had mysterious red, itchy bumps on her wrist. *Flea bites*, she called them.

That is when our lives broke into pieces.