



Mark of the Plague (Blackthorn Key)

By Kevin Sands

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Christopher Rowe is back and there are more puzzles, riddles, and secrets to uncover in this follow-up to the Indie Next pick *The Blackthorn Key*, which was called a “spectacular debut” by *Kirkus Reviews* in a starred review.

The Black Death has returned to London, spreading disease and fear through town. A mysterious prophet predicts the city’s ultimate doom—until an unknown apothecary arrives with a cure that actually works. Christopher’s Blackthorn shop is chosen to prepare the remedy. But when an assassin threatens the apothecary’s life, Christopher and his faithful friend Tom are back to hunting down the truth, risking their lives to untangle the heart of a dark conspiracy.

And as the sickness strikes close to home, the stakes are higher than ever before...

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Gr 4–8—This follow-up to *The Blackthorn Key* places readers right in the middle of the nastiest event the 1600s had to offer—the Black Plague. Not only are Christopher and his friends tasked with avoiding the deadly disease but they must also contend with the prophets, zealots, and frauds who seem to attach themselves to all tragic events. Sands's writing is gripping and expertly paced. The action spins with breathless twists and turns. The characters react logically without appearing clairvoyant. The deep understanding of herbs, mixtures, and remedies will inspire some and astound others. Christopher and his companions are relatable tweens. This story would make for a great fictional pairing in history class.

VERDICT An excellent sequel. Readers who haven't yet discovered this series are in for a treat.—Chad Lane, Tulip Grove Elementary School, MD

About the Author

Since escaping from university with a pair of degrees in theoretical physics, Kevin Sands has worked as a researcher, a business consultant, and a teacher. He lives in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of the award-winning and bestselling *Blackthorn Key* series.

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Mark of the Plague

CHAPTER

1

“THIS IS A BAD IDEA,” Tom said.

He stared sidelong at the device at the end of the workbench, as though, if he looked at it directly, it might poke out his eyes.

“You don’t even know what it does yet,” I said.

He bit his lip. “I’m pretty sure I don’t want to.”

The contraption did look rather . . . well, odd. It was five inches tall, with a bulging top balanced over a narrow upright cylinder, wrapped tightly in folded paper. The upper part of the device balanced on three wooden prongs sticking out of the bottom. A wick of cannon fuse trailed from its end.

“It’s like a mushroom,” Tom said. “With a tail.” He edged away from the workbench. “A flammable tail.”

I couldn’t help feeling slightly wounded. Odd or not, this device was the most important thing I’d ever made. All of the other equipment in the apothecary workshop—the ceramic jars, the molded glassware, the spoons and cups and pots and cauldrons—lay crammed on the side benches, cold and quiet. Only the faint scent of ingredients and concoctions lingered in the room. Even the giant onion-shaped oven in the corner was still. Because this was the creation that would save my shop.

I held it up with pride. “Blackthorn’s Smoke-Your-Home! Guaranteed to . . . uh . . . smoke your home. Well, that advertisement needs work.”

“Your brain needs work,” Tom muttered.

Now that was going too far. “My inventions do exactly what they’re supposed to.”

“I know,” Tom said. “That’s the problem.”

“But—look.” I put my Smoke-Your-Home back down—gently—and showed him my design, sketched on an unrolled sheet of vellum.

“It’s like a firework,” I said, which in retrospect was probably not the best way to start.

Blackthorn’s Smoke-Your-Home

Invented by Christopher Rowe, Apothecary’s Apprentice



“You light the fuse at the bottom. The gunpowder in the lower part pops the top into the air. Then the second fuse makes that burst.” I swept my arm over it like I was hawking silks at the Royal Exchange. “Fills any room with smoke to keep your family safe! Designed to help drive off the plague!”

“Uh-huh,” Tom said. I think my theatrics made him less impressed. “Why is it full of flour?”

“That’s the best part. Watch.”

I went to the side of the workshop, where I’d stored the two sacks of flour I had left. I grabbed a handful of it and picked up the taper burning on the workbench. When I puffed the flour into it, it burst with a bright flash of flame.

“See?” I said. “It explodes. That’s what blew up Campden’s mill last summer. There was too much flour in the air.”

Tom pressed his fingers to his forehead. “You based an invention on an exploding mill?”

“Well . . . it’s less dangerous than gunpowder, right?” Tom didn’t seem to think that was a selling point. “Anyway, when the flour explodes, it incinerates the sawdust and herbs, filling the room with smoke. And that smoke is the best thing we know of that will prevent you getting the plague. We can even make them to order, put whatever wood inside the customer wants.”

“Why couldn’t they just make a fire?” Tom said.

“You can’t just light random fires around your house,” I said.

“Yes, this seems much safer.”

“It is,” I insisted. “You just have to keep it away from curtains. And oil lamps. And pets. And—look, I’ll

show you.”

Tom backed away. “Wait. You’re not really going to set that off?”

“What else would I do with it?”

“I thought you were just playing a joke on me.”

From high up on the ingredient shelves, a plump salt-and-pepper-speckled pigeon fluttered down to where I stood. She cooed.

“That’s right, Bridget,” Tom said. “Talk some sense into him.”

Bridget pecked at the cannon fuse. She recoiled with a grunt and took off, wings flapping her up the stairs.

“See?” Tom ducked behind the workbench. “Even the bird thinks you’re mad.”

“You’re going to regret this when I’m knee-deep in gold,” I said.

Tom’s voice called from behind the wood. “I’ll take my chances.”

I lit the fuse. I watched it crackle and spark, then joined Tom behind the bench. Not because I was worried, of course. It just seemed . . . prudent.

The fuse reached the bottom. For a moment, there was nothing.

Then the gunpowder ignited. There was a hissing, and sparks shot from the bottom. The cylinder popped into the air.

I pulled on Tom’s sleeve. “It works! It works!”

Then the second charge began to burn. A thin, smoking flame rushed out of the bottom. Slowly, it tipped sideways. Then it rocketed through the door into the shop.

“Was that supposed to happen?” Tom said.

“Well . . . ,” I said, but the correct answer was: no.

From the doorway to the shop came a flash. Then a BOOM. The boom was expected. The voice that followed it was not.

“AAHHHH!” it said.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Esta Banks:

Here thing why this specific Mark of the Plague (Blackthorn Key) are different and reliable to be yours. First

of all reading through a book is good but it really depends in the content from it which is the content is as delightful as food or not. *Mark of the Plague (Blackthorn Key)* giving you information deeper and different ways, you can find any guide out there but there is no reserve that similar with *Mark of the Plague (Blackthorn Key)*. It gives you thrill looking at journey, its open up your own eyes about the thing which happened in the world which is perhaps can be happened around you. You can actually bring everywhere like in park your car, café, or even in your technique home by train. Should you be having difficulties in bringing the published book maybe the form of *Mark of the Plague (Blackthorn Key)* in e-book can be your alternate.

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