

BOOK ONE
INGLEFORN

I buried with my own hands five of my children in a single grave ...

No bells. No tears. This is the end of the world.

Agnolo di Tura

1348

The year I turned thirteen, it rained every day from Midsummer to Christmastide. Sheep, huddled grey and sodden and miserable in the fields, caught the murrain and died. What oats and barley and rye we could grow was weak and spindly and covered in strange green mould, which had to be scraped off before the grain could be milled. Everyone was hungry most of the time, and in the villages further down the valley, people died.

Travellers passing through Ingleforn on the road from York told stories of strange happenings in distant lands. Earthquakes and volcanoes and a new sickness that swept through the people of the cities leaving not a soul alive. Mostly, the travellers were quite cheerful about these disasters.

“Not a good year to be a Frenchie,” they’d say. And,

“Paris will be King Edward’s for the taking, if he wants it.”

Even the wandering holy men, the hermits and friars, the preachers and pardoners, even they seemed to relish all this destruction happening over the seas.

“God sends His angels to wipe the wicked from the earth!” they cried, and the villagers nodded and sighed and agreed that yes, there were a lot of wicked in Italy and France and Spain indeed, and wasn’t it terrible?

But in the summer of the year of grace 1348, the stories changed. The sickness had come to Bristol, some said. At first it was just a rumour, then as more travellers told the same tale, we started to believe it. Then the sickness - the pestilence - was in London. London!

Now the preachers and pardoners and hermits and friars told a new story.

“The end of the world is coming!” they said, eyes blazing with righteousness, hair wild and untamed. “Repent! Repent!” And the villagers muttered together in little huddles, and some of them talked about selling their land and moving north, to Duresme maybe, or the wild lands beyond, in Scotland, as though they could somehow hide from the wrath of God.

We should have known then that 1349 would be terrible beyond the reach of our imaginings.

But nobody could have imagined quite how terrible it was going to be.

May Morning

It's Sunday morning, early, towards the end of May. It's dark still, the pale grey light before dawn, and below the floor of the solar my baby brother Edward is crying. On the mattress beside me, Ned groans and buries his head in the bolster, but I lie and listen to the creak of the bed as Alice climbs out of it below me. A few moments later, I hear her footsteps on the earth floor. I push myself up on my elbows and lift aside the blanket-curtain, peering down. Alice is wearing nothing but a woollen slip and a nightcap, her yellow hair impossibly rumpled as always in the mornings. She lowers herself onto a stool and opens her slip, revealing her heavy, mottled breast. Edward's screams are quietened as he suckles. Alice looks up and smiles as she sees me watching.

"Awake, are you?" she says. "Can you get dressed and get the others up? I'll need someone to go for water."

There are a lot of people in my family. I have four brothers - two older and two younger - and one little sister. The boys don't live here any more. Richard lives with his wife Joan in a little house he built himself at the other end of the village. Geoffrey - my favourite brother - comes next. He moved out when he was eleven. He's at St Mary's abbey, training to be a priest.

I'm next, then red-haired Ned, who's nine, and little Margaret, still the baby of the family even now we have Edward. They're curled up on the mattress beside me. I shake Ned.

"Nedkin, it's morning. Wake up!"

Ned moans and curls up tighter in his warm little ball of elbows-and-knees.

Margaret is still asleep, a strand of yellow hair falling over her cheek. She wakes easily, blinks her blue eyes and smiles at me.

"Is it morning?"

"Morning. Come on. Get your clothes on."

Father built our solar for a bedchamber, a triangular loft space under the roof of our house. It's almost exactly the right size for our mattress, which is made of sacking stuffed with hay. In the corners where the roof slopes down to the floor, grain sacks and tallow candles and lengths of rope are packed. No space is wasted.

"Ned!" I shake my brother again. "Come *on*."

I pull my gown over my head and climb barefoot down the ladder. Maggie follows behind me, carrying her clothes in a bundle. She's too little yet to know how to dress herself in our triangle of space. I help her fasten her shoes and tug the comb through her hair. She squeals.

"You're hurting!"

"Here -"

Alice takes the comb and starts teasing out Maggie's tangles. I sit on the bottom rung of our ladder and pull on my hose. It's dark. Alice hasn't had time to start the hearthfire, and the shutters are still drawn across the narrow windows. The air is cold enough to make me shiver.

The hearth sits in the centre of the room. Alice's pots and flagons and goblets hang round-bellied beside the hams and cheese on the shelves above the table against the wall, out of reach of the animals. Other everyday things lean against the walls - buckets and scythes and brooms and sacks of barley and an ale-barrel half-full of ale and Alice's loom with a bolt of cloth half-woven. In the low space beneath our solar, a blanket is nailed to the cross-beam to hide the bed where Father and Alice and Edward sleep.

At the other end of the room, the animals sleep are waking up, behind their wattle wall. Our cow, Beatrice, snorts at me through her nose. We have two oxen for the plough, a cow, a pig, eight chickens and a fine red cockerel. Father is always talking about building a byre to keep the animals apart, but he never does. I don't mind. I like the cosiness of all sleeping together, the funny snorts and breathy noises from the cows in the night, their warmth in winter. They add a rich, earthy, animal smell to the other scents in the house - wood smoke and straw and thyme and rosemary from the herbs hanging from the beams to dry.

My name is Isabel. I am fourteen years old, and I can't imagine ever living another sort of life to this.

How wrong I am.

"Done?" says Alice, as Mag leans back into her knees. "You look like a girl who wants to fetch some water. Ned! Aren't you up yet? The sun'll be up before you, and we all know what a lay-a-bed she is. Come on!"

But the sun is stirring, turning the frowsy wisps of cloud a pale, early-morning pink. Summer will be here soon. I can feel it as I walk to the well, swinging the empty bucket beside me. Soon

there'll be sunshine and harvest and swimming in the river by the church. On a morning like this, the sickness seems very far away.

It isn't far from our house to the well. As I walk across the green, I pass other village houses, built in odd clumps around the water-mill, the green, and the river, the distances between them growing as you move further away from the church, which sits at the very centre of Ingleforn. Here too is the forge, and the oven, and the Manor Oak, where they hold the Manor Court three times a year. Beyond the churchyard are the archery butts, where every able-bodied man is supposed to work at his archery every day, though Sir Edmund doesn't mind too much if sometime they forget, particularly at harvest-time and hay-making. The road from York runs alongside the river for as many miles as I've travelled, crossing into the village at the bridge by the water-mill and coming along past the church and the front of our gate. The carters come through nearly every day, and the pilgrims in the spring on their way to St William's shrine, and the wandering preachers, and the merchants, and the lepers, and the madmen, and the holy fools. These last months and weeks, the road has been full of fugitives from the south, families with everything they own on the back of two oxen, rich men on horses and hay-carts piled with furniture and spades and chickens in cages. Gilbert Reeve won't let them come through the village for fear they carry the pestilence – he makes them go round the village boundaries. I wonder where they all think they're going. I wonder if anywhere will let them stay.

The two big village fields – Three Oaks and Hilltop – are spread one to the left and one to the right of our door. Father farms nearly a virgates of land divided between the two. Behind the house is a narrow copse of woodland, where the swineherd takes the pigs to hunt for truffles, and where most of the village collects the wood for their fires. Sir Edmund's manor house rests at the other side of the woods – we go for the festivities at Christmastide, but mostly leave it well alone. Sir Edmund has another, larger estate in Devon, and a big house in London where he lives for most of the year, God rest his soul.

Behind the manor house is the abbey, where my brother Geoffrey lives. Behind the abbey is Riding Edge, and beyond it more farmland – rich, flat ploughland all the way to York, where I've never been, but Alice says isn't worth the journey,

“Not when you could be here, Isabel. Not when you could be here!”

There's a line of women and children already waiting by the well. I join the back of the waiting women. The others nod in my direction, rumped and sleepy-eyed. Plump, copper-haired Amabel Dyer, who's about my age and sort of a friend, smiles at me.

The women are talking in little huddles.

"They have it in York!"

"York!"

"Fifty dead already, I heard."

"I heard a hundred."

"My man Nicholas said the road from York is full of families, fleeing North. Horses and ox-carts and rich men in fancy litters with servants to carry them about so they don't ever need to walk."

Amabel Dyer catches my eye.

"Is it true about York?" she whispers. "Does Geoffrey know?"

My stomach belly tightens.

"Of course it's not," I tell Amabel. "It's just carter's tales." But the women's words have taken the happiness out of the bright morning.

The Romance of Father and Alice

Alice is my stepmother, and one of my favourite people in the world. It's like a mummer's play, how she and Father married. My mother died when Maggie was born, and after that Father didn't want to marry anyone else. He sent Maggie to Robin's mother to nurse, and my brother Richard, who was fourteen, had to look after Ned and Geoffrey and I. He wasn't very good at it, and we got used to living with dirty clothes, and burnt pottage, and stale ale, and a hearth-fire that wouldn't light because all the wood was wet.

The women in the village tutted their tongues at this, and brought us to the manor court, where Sir Edmund's steward ordered Father to remarry within three weeks, or have another wife found for him. But Father wouldn't. He just nodded his head and carried on like he was. So then Sir Edmund's steward looked at Ned and Geoffrey and I, with our red eyes and muddy faces and hair all wild, and told Father that he had to marry Agnes Harelip by Midsummer Day.

Poor Father! And poor us. Agnes Harelip is an old shrew. She works as a spinster, and she lives in this neat little cottage where everything is just so. She looked at Richard and Geoffrey and Ned and me with absolute horror. Father pursed up his lips, but he didn't say anything. The next day though, he washed his face and hands, and mine too, and combed my hair, and he took me to the house where Agnes's father lived.

Father knocked on the door, and Alice answered. Her yellow hair was coiled in a knot at the back of her neck, but these long strands had escaped and were fuzzing up around her ears. Her big hands were covered in malt, but her eyes were laughing and kind.

"Is your father there?" Father said, and Alice said,

"No, but come and take a sup, and bring the child too."

Inside, the house was neat and swept, and Alice's little brother and sisters were tumbling about by the hearth. Alice gave us a bowl of pottage, and Father asked about the children, and I sat there eating up my bowl and wishing everything was as nice as this at home.

After a while, Alice's mother said the washing wouldn't do itself, and we must excuse her, and she went out, with a look at Alice. And Alice and Father sat holding their bowls and looking at the fire.

"You've a big family," said Father, and Alice said yes, she had three little brothers and sisters, and one older, who was Agnes.

"But that's what I like," she said. "I'd feel strange in a house that wasn't full of children."

"We've four in our house," said Father. "And the baby. It's a lot to ask a woman to come to."

"I certainly wouldn't ask Agnes!" said Alice, and she laughed. "Sir Edmund didn't know what he was letting your lot in for, if you ask me."

"Would you have them?" said Father, and Alice looked at him not at all surprised.

"I'd want my own as well," she said, and Father nodded.

"Of course."

"All right," she said, and that was that. They were married after mass at the church door. And it wasn't long before we all loved her, apart from Richard who I think was jealous, being the oldest. But at least he didn't have to look after us any more.

Alice nearly had a baby three times before Edward. Twice the child came too early. Once she had a little girl who only lived a day. But last year, Edward came and stayed.

"Edward's my name!" said Ned, when the baby was introduced to us. Ned's really an Edward, after his godfather, Edward Miller, who is baby Edward's godfather too. Father hopes he'll apprentice them both at the mill when they're older.

Richard doesn't like Alice much, but he *hates* her baby. I can sort of see why. The more children Father and Alice have, the less land there is for everyone, and without land we'll all go hungry.

"Maybe Edward will marry a lord's daughter and keep us all instead," I say to Richard, but he just scowls at the crib, as though he's working out exactly how many acres baby Edward will take from his inheritance.

Sir Edmund is never going to tell me who to marry, because I'm going to marry Robin; dark-haired, gentle, earnest Robin. We've been betrothed all our lives. Mother was friends with his mother, and his father, who died of the quinsy when Robin was small. Robin will inherit his land when he's twenty-one.

My brother Geoffrey knows a lot of romances. I know Tristan and Iseult, and Lancelot and

Guinevere, and lots from the mystery plays at Easter. I don't think Robin and I are a romance though. He's too funny-looking and skinny, and his ears stick out, and his hair is too all-over-the-place. I don't expect I'll ever have a romance like Iseult did. I've always just had Robin, as far back as I can remember.