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Opening extract from

All Fall Down

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Published by

Marion Lloyd Books

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And the villagers muttered together in little huddles, and some of the richer men – the free men, the franklins and the yeomen – 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. Most of them shook their heads and sucked in their teeth. Most of them don't have the gold to flee. Or we belong to Sir Edmund, and have no choice in the matter anyway.

We knew then that 1349 would be terrible.

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

1. *Morning*

It's Sunday morning, early, towards the beginning of June. 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 on to 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 older 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 left 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, 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. 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 started the hearth-fire, 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 sit round-bellied beside the hams and cheese on the shelves above the table, 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, behind their wattle wall, the animals are waking up, . 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 in the night, their warmth in winter. They add a rich, earthy, animal smell to the other scents in the house – woodsmoke and straw and thyme and rosemary.

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.

Our house sits a little apart from the other houses of the village, on the edge of the green, in the shade of two hornbeam trees. It isn't far to the well. As I walk across the grass, I pass other village houses, built in odd clumps around the watermill, 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 is the forge, and the oven, and the Manor Oak, where Sir Edmund's steward holds 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, though Sir Edmund doesn't mind too much if sometimes they forget, particularly at harvest time and hay-making.

The road from York runs along the river for as many miles as I've travelled it, crossing into the village at the bridge by the watermill 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, the merchants, the lepers, the madmen, and the holy fools.

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 virgate of land divided between the two. Behind the house is a narrow copse of woodland, and behind the woods is Sir Edmund's manor house – we go for the festivities at Christmastide, but mostly we stay away.

Why worry the rich, if you don't want them to worry you? Sir Edmund has another, larger estate in Devon, and a big house in London where he lives for most of the year, God keep him.

Behind the manor house is the village of Great Riding, and behind the furthest edge of Great Riding's fields 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, two long days' walking away, 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. The others nod in my direction, rumpled 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 belly tightens.

"Of course it's not," I tell Amabel. "It's just carters' tales."

But all the happiness has gone from the bright morning.

York is less than a day's ride away.

York is nearly here.