



1349

**A deadly contagion is racing through England.
And no one knows how to stop it.**

Isabel and her family have nowhere to run from a disease that has already killed half of Europe and is fast approaching their village. When the world she knows and loves ends for ever, Isabel's only weapon is courage.

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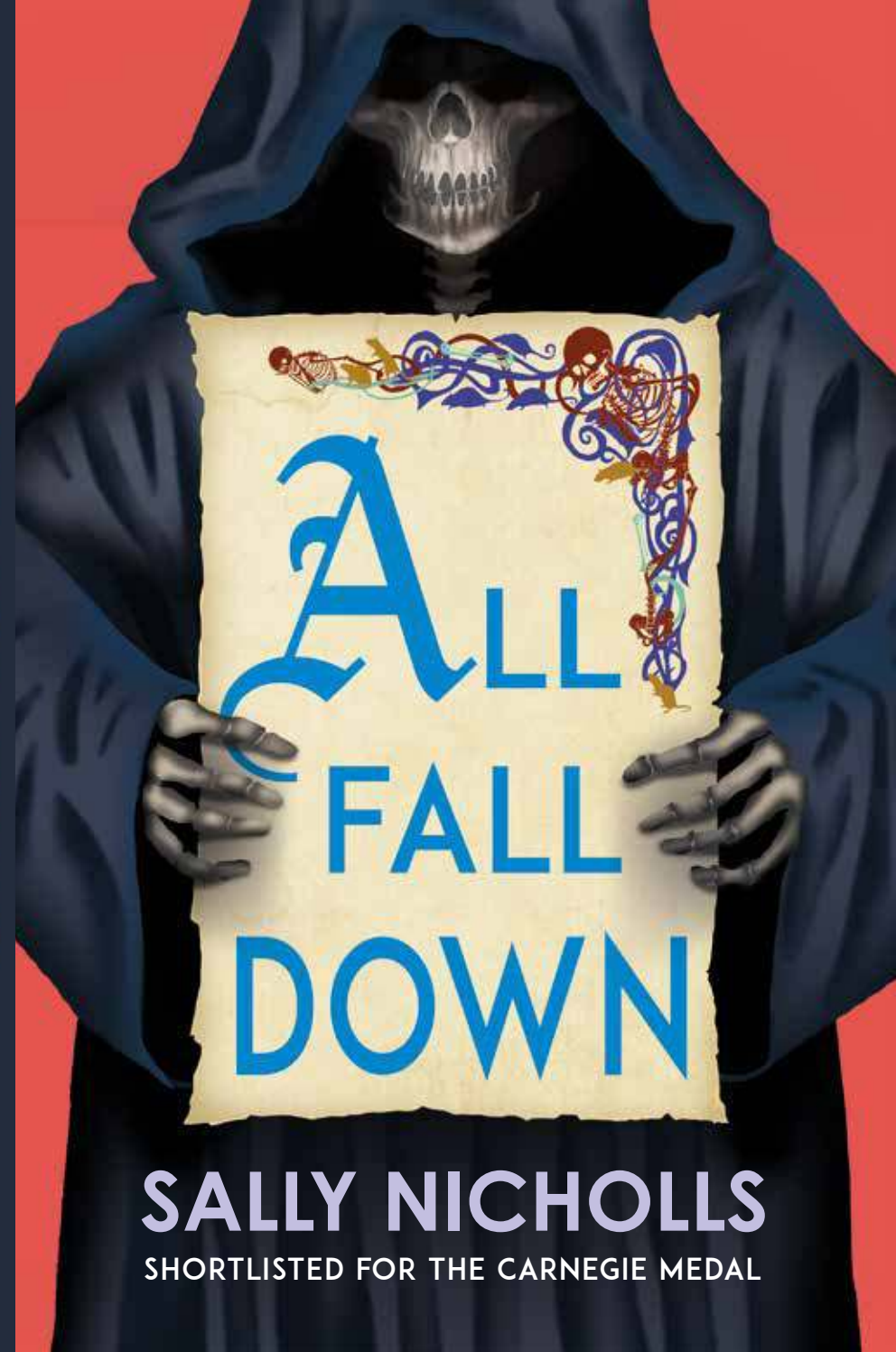


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NICHOLLS

ALL FALL DOWN

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SALLY NICHOLLS

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DOWN

SALLY NICHOLLS



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To Zoe Owlett,
who is, I am assured,
very cool.

Book one
Engleford

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 in the fields, caught the murrain and died. What oats and barley and rye we could grow were 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 up the valley, people died.

Travellers passing through Ingleforn on the road from York told stories of strange happenings in faraway 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 Castile and Aragon and France 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 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 didn’t have the gold to flee. Or they belonged to Sir Edmund, and had 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 at the other end of the village. Then it's Geoffrey – my favourite brother. 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 a general pet 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 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 a 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?' Alice asks me, 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. It's still cold, but 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 Ingleford. 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 threading 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, 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, 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 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 two days’ walk away.

York is nearly here.

2. 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 a woman in the village to nurse, and my brother Richard, who was fifteen, had to look after me and Ned and Geoffrey. 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 clicked 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 me, 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, spinning thread for the yeomen's wives in Ingleforn and Great Riding, 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 Agnes's sister Alice answered. I knew her a little, and I liked her even then. 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, he's gone to visit my sister Agnes – but come and take a sup, and bring the child too.'

Inside, the house was neat and swept, and the children 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.

'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. 'That old fool 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.'

'Well then,' 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, and he hates her baby. 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. I'm glad he's here though. I love Alice. I'm so happy she has a baby of her own.

3. Sunday Mass

The church is full for mass today, but no one is listening to Sir John – our priest – as he drones away in Latin. The news about York runs from body to body, crackling in the air like summer lightning. Nobody can talk of anything but the sickness.

‘In London, they don’t bury the bodies any more, they just leave them lying in the streets. Anyone who can leave has left.’

‘What about the ones who can’t?’ says John Dyer, in a whisper. There’s a pause while no one says anything, and then the muttering starts again.

‘You can’t outrun it. It travels with you. I heard about a man who fled from Lynn. Went to his sister’s. He thought he’d escaped . . . didn’t have a mark on him. Two weeks later he was dead. So was his sister and all the children.’

‘In the south there are dead places where nobody lives any more. All these little villages, all the houses empty . . .’

‘York!’

Amabel and I stand with Robin and listen.

‘Everyone isn’t dead in London, are they?’ says Amabel.

‘They can’t be,’ says Robin. ‘How many of those men have been to London? They’re just telling stories.’

‘York, though . . .’

When I grow up, I’m going to marry 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.

The tone of the conversations in the church has changed

these last few weeks. William-at-the-Wood is talking in his loud voice to Father. He's leaving the village, selling his land to his eldest son.

'I'll not stay around to watch God destroy my children,' he says. 'I'm off up north tomorrow.'

'Where?' says Father. 'Where will you go?' I close my eyes and picture it, William-at-the-Wood off into the wild north where no one can ever find him again. He'll make his fortune selling ribbons or fool's gold, and his daughters will come back princesses and ladies with ermine cloaks and white skin.

William spits and shakes his head. 'Up to Newcastle,' he says. 'Then Scotland. It's a wild land, Scotland – we'll be safe there, I reckon. I wouldn't stay here if I were you, Walt. I'd pack up while you still can.'

Now the picture has changed – Robin's family and mine, all our household on the back of our oxen, Stumpy and Gilbert, marching down the wide, grassy roads to the land of the mad Scots. Sleeping in inns, running ahead of the pestilence.

But Father sucks his teeth.

'Maybe,' he says, and I know we won't be going. We can no more leave our land than Geoffrey can leave his abbey. On the road, we'd be beggars, or hired labourers at best.

'Good luck to ye, then,' says William, and he turns away.

'Can you really believe,' says Amabel, 'that the pestilence could come here?'

'No,' I say, and I mean it. Plagues and rains of frogs and thunderbolts and sieges where everyone dies happen, I know they do – I've met people who've seen them with their own

eyes. But they happen a long way away, in foreign countries where everyone is a heathen and no one has heard of Jesus Christ. I have tried to imagine such a disaster happening here – in Ingleforn! – but my mind cannot hold it.

At the front of the church, the musicians are playing the opening notes of a hymn. The choir – with them my brother Ned – begin to sing. I close my eyes. I believe God punishes the wicked, just as I believe He speaks to his prophets through burning bushes and cures the lame by laying His hand on them. I believe that.

I just don't believe it could happen here.

Afterwards, we stay behind to admire the new painting on the church wall. Sir John hopes that a holy painting might appease God's anger, and we're not about to argue. The young artist has painted Noah, standing in his ark, watching with mild interest as the sinners are swallowed up and drowned. You can't see much of the sinners, just their arms waving about as the waters cover their heads.

'Which is the most pious of God's creatures?' says Sir John. Emma Baker answers, 'The pelican.'

'The pelican,' says Sir John. 'Who tears her own flesh from her breast to feed her young ones.'

*'Pious Pelican, Lord Jesus,
Cleanse me the impure, in your blood,
Of which one drop can save
The whole world of all sin.'*

Maggie likes this new picture, with the elephant and the chimera poking their heads out of the ark, but Ned prefers the

one on the other wall, of the sinners burning in hell and the devils poking them with pitchforks.

‘Does the pelican really eat its own stomach?’ he asks Alice. ‘Why?’

‘You do such things for your children,’ says Alice. She’s holding Edward across her chest. He opens his mouth and dribbles down her shoulder.

‘Would you? For Edward?’

‘If I had to.’ Alice isn’t like Mrs Noah in the mystery play, who wails and screams when they try to get her onto the ark. If her children were in danger, Alice would be out there chopping down trees and sawing up planks, as fast as the rain fell down around her.

‘Would you do it for me?’ asks Mag. Alice laughs and ruffles her hair.

‘A big girl like you?’ she says. ‘I’d send you off to get us a pelican for the pot. Pelican stew, how’s that for a feast?’