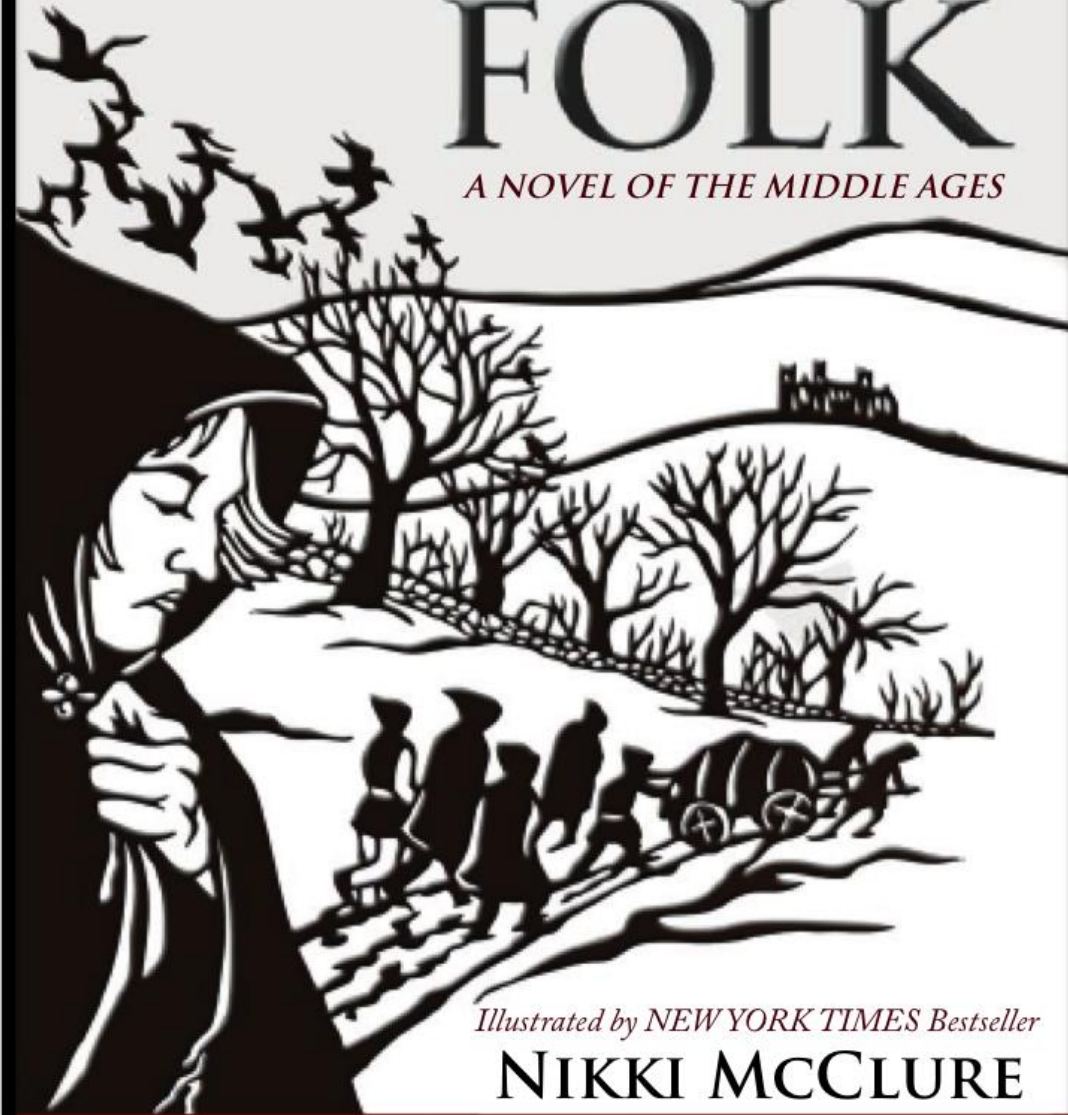


SINFUL FOLK

A NOVEL OF THE MIDDLE AGES



Illustrated by NEW YORK TIMES Bestseller

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Pray for us, we sinful folk unstable...
My child is dead within these two weeks,
Soon after that, we went out of this town...
Up I rose, with many a tear trickling on my cheeks

—Geoffrey Chaucer,
The Canterbury Tales

A CURIOUS incident is brought to our attention from the year 1377. In December of that coldest year in the medieval records, the village of Duns in the northeast of England suffered a great tragedy. Five of its young boys were burned to death in a house fire near the center of the village.

As was common with many tragic events in that century, it was supposed the Jews were to blame. Yet all Jews were destroyed, forcibly converted, or expelled from England by order of the Crown, some fifty years earlier, in 1325.

Although most English peasants at that time had never traveled during the course of their lives more than twenty miles from the place of their birth, five men from the village of Duns loaded the charred bodies of their children on a farm cart and journeyed over two hundred miles to London. The Court record states that the villagers went to present the bodies to the King, and to demand justice against the Jews.

The historical record is clear on these few facts. History does not record any further details about the incident—neither the motivations, intentions, nor experiences of those who undertook this arduous journey are noted. Not a single person from the village is identified, not even the guilty party.

—Miria Hallum,
The Hollow Womb: Child Loss in the Middle Ages

LITURGY OF THE HOURS

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Lauds | Aurora, the dawn prayer, to greet the day |
| Prime | Early morning prayer, first hour, about 6 a.m. |
| Terce | Midmorning prayer, third hour, about 9 a.m. |
| Sext | Midday prayer, sixth hour, about noon |
| None | Midafternoon prayer, ninth hour, about 3 p.m. |
| Vespers | Evening prayer, at the lighting of lamps, 6 p.m. |
| Compline | Night prayer, before retiring for sleep |
| Matins | Vigils or Nocturns, during the hours of night |

BOOK 1



CHAPTER I

IN THE END, I listen to my fear. It keeps me awake, resounding through the frantic beating in my breast. It is there in the dry terror in my throat, in the pricking of the rats' nervous feet in the darkness.

Christian has not come home all the night long.

I know, for I have lain in this darkness for hours now with my eyes stretched wide, yearning for my son's return.

Each night that he works late, I cannot sleep. I am tormented when he is not here—I fear that he will never return. I lie awake, plagued by my own fears of loss and loneliness.

But my fears have never come to pass.

So on this night, I tell myself that the sound I hear is frost cracking, river ice breaking. I lie to my own heart, as one lies to a frightened child, one who cannot be saved.

All the while, I know it is a fire. And I know how near it is.

First, I could hear shouts and cries. Then there was the sound of rapid running, of men hauling buckets of water and ordering children to help.

A house burns.

Yet always I fear to venture forth, for my fright has grown into a panic that gibbers in the dark. *What if someone started this fire to burn me out?*

What sport would they have, watching a mute moan as she turns on the spit?

A crackle and hiss in the distance. A heavy thud, and then the roar of an inferno. *Where is Christian? I must go, I—*

Scrambling out of the straw, I rush to the door in my nightclothes. Then I remember poor Nell, who died last spring.

I do not forget her agony.

I blunder in the darkness, fumbling for the fireplace soot. I smear the smooth edge of my jaw, marking with trembling fingers a hint of beard on my soft upper lip and my chin.

Always, I must hide my true face.

As my fingers work, I grip hope to me, a small bird quaking in the nest of my heart. Desperately, I mumble the words of a prayer from my past.

O Alma Redemptoris . . .

My sooty ritual is perhaps my own strange paean to womanhood. Like Theresa of Avignon, that spoiled heiress of the French throne, who shared my vows at Canterbury, the world will see me only as I intend. It is a type of vanity: if I cannot be a woman, I will be as ugly a man as I can muster.

And in this ceremony, my dread subsides. My fingers stop trembling. I think clearly for a moment. Even now, perhaps Christian is one of those who carry buckets of water to fight the flames. Christian will be fine. He is strong, vital, alive. He is mine, and I am his.

All will be well. I repeat it in my head like a rosary. *All will be well.*

Then there are harsh shouting voices outside, men rushing toward the burning building. "Trapped!" they shout.

Now I quake with dread, for I am not finished. I should wrap my bosom tightly, bind the feminine shape of my body into that of a eunuch. But I lunge for the door, my bosom unbound, my heart full of fear for my son, and fear for my own flesh.

Even as my heart belies me, I pray that this fire is nothing. Nothing to do with my life, my secrets.



Across the village square, the largest house—the home of Benedict, the weaver—is consumed by flame. Every piece of wood smokes and bends in the fire. The roof seems supported not by heavy timbers, but by ropy masses of blazing smoke.

It is the home where my son is an apprentice.

The smoke chokes and claws at my nostrils and my throat. The roof catches in a roar of flaming darkness. The crowd churns in turmoil, seeking to save their village, their children.

Not one of the villagers pays the slightest heed to me.

I am an old man to them, and a broken, mute one at that—wiry as a starved mule, leathery with long labor. It is rare that any in this village look beyond the wrinkles and the rat's nest of chestnut-colored hair to see my face.

Tonight, I force them to see me. I seize each of their faces with my gaunt hands, turning them, staring quickly into each pair of wild, frightened eyes. Here is that layabout Liam's frightened pale face and red beard. He looks for his son too. Across the way is a boy wrapped in a cloak and hood. My heart lifts—is it Christian?

But when I meet that boy's eyes, they are black as night. It is only Cole, the orphan. I see my friend Salvius, the blacksmith. He runs past, throwing water on the flames.

Then I see Tom, who hangs back in the crowd. I clutch at him, wanting answers, but Tom pushes me away, his wide-set, cowish face full of fear.

I turn. I pull down another man's hood, and it is bald Benedict, the weaver who owns this house. He gives me a dark glance and pulls away, to lift a bucket of water.

I grasp a short man next, small Geoff, the carpenter, with the squint. "Where's my boy?" he shouts in my face. "Where is he?"

I turn about again, I seize on every person, look into every face. I hope for only one boy, I search for his blue eyes. My son.

Christian.

Is this really all the living folk we have? Frantically, I count on my fingers. All the women accounted for and most of the men.

Only a few are not here: Jack, whose foot was trampled by a cow, and Phoebe, who is about to give birth. Benedict's wife will be with her this night—Sophia is the closest we have to a midwife now, now that Nell is gone.

That accounts for three. *But where are the older boys?*

Desperately, I search each of these villager's faces again and again—going over old ground—until they push me away.

Men and women shout their children's names. "Breton! Matthew! Stephen! Jonathon!" The large boy who belongs to Tom. The son of the carpenter. Then the second son of the weaver. And the eldest son of Liam, the woodsman. But there is only one name that echoes in my mind, and no one shouts it aloud. My son, my only.

Christian— Christian— Christian—

The house falls half apart, split wide, a timbered carcass steaming and cracking in the winter frost. Salvius is always brave: he leaps up onto the smoldering threshold and uses a beam to batter in the smoking door. Then Liam steps into the smoke, wrapping his arms in a wet cloak.

I push my way through the milling villagers to see Liam and Salvius emerge, dragging out a charred body. Then another, and another. Five, in the end—all the missing accounted for.

My tongue forms his name, but I cannot speak a word. Instead, I give a cry—that meaningless animal groan that is my only language now.

The flames rise again, the west wind gusts strong across the heath, a demon roaring as it takes the building apart. The crackle is that of hell itself. The men run frantically with buckets of water to save the neighboring crofts.

The five bodies lie on the ground, black as broken shadows. They stink now of death. Burned flesh, scorched wool. It is a nauseating stench, yet despite myself, my mouth waters at the smell of flame-roasted meat. I am always so hungry.

A bit of metal glimmers faintly below one charred head. It is a thin silver chain. *Is that my chain? My boy's neck?*

I am pierced to the root then, all of my veins bathed in a liquor of terror.

CHAPTER 2

THE DAY IS almost upon us, the houses and trees silhouetted by a faint blue light in the east. The burned croft is a smoking wreck, embers steaming in the dawn.

The wind dies now. In this winter, we have had several unfortunate fires, but this is the worst yet. The crowd slows its frantic work, as the danger fades.

Now I can hear them: the cries of children, the sobs of babes in arms. No doubt those cries were all around me for hours in the crowd. Yet I had ears only for one cry, and that cry never came.

The bodies are surrounded by their families. These youth were our bleak earth's brightest, our highest roll on Fortune's wheel.

I go to the dead. They are blackened and unrecognizable, each boy stretched out like a penitent against the raw earth. *These are other children, not mine, not mine.*

But I reach out my hand, I cross them with the holy sign. My mouth moves silently in the rhythm of that last rite, although I have not a whit of faith left in me.

If I still believed in such fictions, the souls of these innocents would be trapped in limbo for eternity. A cold God to condemn children to such punishment. And *my* blessing means nothing: we have no priest in this village, no sacrament of burial, no sacraments at all.

The world blurs as my eyes go wet.

A voice calls my name loud. "Mear!" I turn, blind and terrified, covering my tear-streaked face. Liam's voice is strained and hoarse. "Mear. Ah, Mear, there is no shame in tears. All of us have lost."

Liam is the poorest man in the village, and we have lived side by side so long that I have wondered if he and his wife Kate see through my soot-

stained skin to the woman underneath. I stay apart from him as much as I can, but always he talks to me, despite my silence.

Most of the villagers act as if I am of no more importance than a beast. No one here ever pays me mind. There are few who know I am alive. I prefer it that way, for I want to be invisible.

Yet I would have taken my child and left long ago except for this man, Liam, and my friends Salvius and Nell. Salvius needs me at his bellows and his smithy—he values my labor and my friendship. And Liam at least helps me laugh.

But Nell—poor Nell—she is gone.

Now Liam puts an arm around my slight shoulders, holding me as I sob. There is no laughter in him after last night. His green eyes are full of water, and his red beard trembles.

“Oh, Mear, thank you for blessin’ their souls.”

Who else has seen me bless and cross the dead?

But Liam does not care that I make the sign reserved for priests and nuns. He mourns over his son, and then he turns to look at another body, close at hand.

“I think here’s your lad. Seems to me it has to be him. He was the last one I brought out—the tallest and the furthest from the door.”

And when he says this, I cannot pretend any longer, I cannot wish away this hard truth. The silver chain glimmers faintly in the dawn light—it does not lie. I fall to my knees. Here is my beloved, my son.

Liam bends down to his own firstborn son, burned and blackened on the ground. A groan comes out of the stricken father, an anguished sound to shake the earth.

Now the crowd swells and crests under the whip of a mad grief.

Tom is slaving out some half-remembered tale, a demonic vision. “This is the work of those who killed the Christ. They are cursed—infested with the devil’s seed! They drink children’s blood in the night!”

Everyone knows this is the third terrible fire we have had this winter. This time, it was Benedict's weaving house that burned, and some in the crowd move toward his family.

"Why were the lads here?" cries Geoff, the carpenter. "Why were they burned?"

"I didn't do it!" Benedict's voice is strained with fear. "They gathered at Vespers, I tell you the truth. They were only here to work on the grand tunics for Sir Peter of Lincoln."

"Where were *you* then?" shouts Liam, choking back a sob. "It's your house!"

"I was with my wife!" Benedict sweeps his hat from his weathered scalp and throws it on the ground. "I took Sophia 'cross the valley to see to Phoebe's birth."

The men stink of rage, like a pan of smoking oil before it catches fire.

"You're a liar!" says Geoff to Bene, pushing toward him through the crowd.

"Goddammit, I lost my son too," Benedict shouts. "I wasn't even here!"

Hob, the alderman, affirms that Benedict returned late, at Nocturns hour.

Most times the crowd will listen to Hob, but today they will not be stilled. Women scream at Benedict and his family, wanting his blood in payment. Small Geoff rushes at Benedict, to hurt him.

But Geoff can't get through the crowd drawn tight around Tom, who bawls out the sordid details of his imagined witchcraft. The Star Chamber, the White Tower, evil stories of Old Gods and black fairies. And that ancient villain, the Jew.

"Every child knows who does dark deeds in the night," shrieks Tom. "Every child knows we suffer now in this world because of that crime against our Lord Jesus Christ. Jews did this!"

Ripe nonsense. But the villagers want so desperately to believe there is a reason for this loss.

Tom tells them that there is a root out of which murder grows, a seed that can be plucked. The fires come most likely from an old chimney catching, or a load of hay that catches spontaneously. Yet no one has died from the previous fires. This time, the villagers want a cause, a goat to tie the blood to, an empty vessel to fill with hatred and bludgeon with their loss.

“The Jews!” calls Tom again.

There are a few of Jewish blood here—I know who they are, even now, years after they converted. *How long will it take the crowd to remember and find those who once were Jews in this village?*

“Damn the Jews to hell!” someone in the crowd shouts. “Make the Jews pay!”

No one notices when I rise from the ground and stagger to the smoking ruin. My mute questions will find no answers in gruesome children’s tales. I know what will tell me the truth—the bare reality of the boys’ deaths. I push through the crowd to the place they died.

What power held the door so the boys could not flee the rising flames?

With my foot, I stir the warm cinders. The door broken by Salvius lies in pieces, smashed flat. But there is a knot here, an unlikely twist of the rope that I must examine.

I can see now that this was the rope that held the door tight closed. I pick at it, pull out pieces of a rope still stretched taut across the doorframe. I have seen this curious binding once before. But no fairie tied this knot. No errant ghostly Jew. It is a triple knot, tied fast across a half hitch. It crumbles to ash under my probing touch.

“Trial by water,” wails Tom. “Trial by fire. Kill the traitor Jews, save the innocent!”

Liam taunts Benedict. “Don’t you know a Jew? Did you burn the place for her, Bene?”

“We are all of us the traitors to our children! Every man in this village,” cries Benedict. “Every man stands accused, every one should suffer trial by water, I tell you. Every one of us!”

“Who do we drown first?” Liam’s face is stained with tears.

“Hell, I know you did it,” screams Geoff at Benedict. “You killed them. Drown yourself in the pond first!”

The people surge back and forth, panicked. My heart thrums, fear shrinking my bowels, quivering through my pulse.

The quarreling men bring back to me the chaos of my dying home village many years ago, when I made that last promise to my mother. I can picture the hands moving from gestures to fists, from sticks to sharp sickles. Quick as a breath.

“That’s enough!” Hob’s deep and lordly voice finally stills the milling crowd. “The blood of these innocents cries out, as our brother Tom tells us. Their souls plead for vengeance! I agree. But I tell you, drowning—or near drowning—half the men of this village won’t bring our children back to us.”

The crowd murmurs affirmation.

“What will bring them back is justice!” shouts Hob. “And there’s one seat of justice here on earth.”

“Kill them Jews,” mutters Tom again. “Kill ’em now.” But the crowd ignores him this time.

Hob cries out louder. “We will take the proof to our King!”

“To the King,” echoes Salvius. His masterful tone is a herald’s cry that cuts through the chaos. Salvius leaps onto Benedict’s cart that stands near at hand and finds a common cause with the crowd. “Come, my friends, we will seek the King’s justice!”

Some in the crowd move at this—the men who shouted loud against the Jews now lift the lifeless bodies from the ground.

Benedict and the orphan, Cole, load the body of Benedict’s son onto the cart. The boy’s corpse lands with a sodden thunk.

Geoff pushes past me, muttering. “If I cannot kill a Jew here, at least I will go with my son, Goddamn them, and tell the king what I think of his damn’d protection against Jews, much good it did us.”

Liam lifts his own son’s cold body. He places him gently on the straw in the cart. “I’ll go with you, my boy,” he says to his son, and shakes with weeping.

The wind blows a hard gust. There is a simmering argument in the crowd. When the harvest failed and the belts tightened in this starving season of ours, most were left too weak to search for food outside the village. *How can any of us take a journey now?*

My friend Salvius waves away the questions. “Yes, yes, we’ve got enough food, and we’re taking strong men only. We’ll make it all the way to London, by God’s bloody Son!”

As the light bleeds into the sky, the feeling of the crowd shifts with it. The hunger for this journey jumps back and forth between the villagers, like the heat of a flame passing between them.

Geoff protests, his voice a thin reed of reason. “We should take them to somewhere close-at-hand. The Abbot at the Cluny Monastery—it is close on the King’s road.”

Salvius skillfully whips them all forward, turning them all toward a journey as a great beast is turned with a small prod.

“The Jews!” the crowd cries. “We seek justice against the Jews—and we will take this proof of their crime all the way to the King. The Throne will judge the Jews!”

The men bellow loud, they swear on their children’s unburied bodies, they will go and find the truth. Hob and Benedict shout themselves hoarse, promising justice to their clans. I turn away—I cannot keep up with the arguments that shudder from the crowd. None of their moans and barks is worth a spit in the wind.

I look at my son, and I sink into grief. When they come to get the body with the necklace, I do not let go. I close my eyes, I can hear them all around, their voices a cacophony.

“Why do you hold on, old Mear?”

“Let the body go.”

“He is the father.”

“Show him pity. He canna speak.”

Tears leak out of my tight-shut eyes. *I want my boy.* My soul is tied to his sweet body, the one stretched out as a tortured savior. I can feel his burning through my flesh, the choking smoke is in my own lungs. I will burn with him.

But however much I wish it, I cannot take myself out of existence. I open my eyes once more. My body still breathes, my heart pounds ignorantly in my bosom.

I will not let him depart from me. I will heal him, I think desperately. I will care for his wounded body until he is well again.

The men lift his body onto the cart.

They are taking him away. There will be nothing left to me. Not a body, not a token, not a grave.

I lift my face, stained with ash and tears. A baying sob breaks from my throat.

Years have passed, almost a decade, since I made a sound that the villagers could hear. Now, all turn toward me. Even the men loading the bodies on the cart heed me.

I make a motion. I will come with them, wherever they are taking my son; I will go too.

Tom points at me and mumbles more of his cracked vision. “Let ’im come along! Mear here, he’ll find the truth, I tell ye. The angels done foretold it.”

People look away from Tom, shaking their heads. Few believe that I understood the debate of the morning and all the decisions that have been made. No one believes that I can make the journey.

I stumble back to our tiny cruck house—wattled and daubed by Christian and me. I bind my bosom firmly this time and I pack what little I have. After the poor harvest this fall, there is no food for me to bring except one old loaf of dark bread and some dried mutton. I put on the tarnished silver chain that matches the one my son wore; and I search for but cannot find my ring. I have had it for years, but it is not in its hiding place under the hearthstone now. My heart plummets at this loss, but it is too late. I do not have time to hunt for it further.

I seize also the sheepskins and furs that make up our bed, and a small pot of soot, for my face in the night, and that is all.



When I return, Hob has ordered supplies from the meager stocks of the village. He asks for sacrifice from families here to sustain the men on the open road, and his appeal is met despite the larder houses that sit empty after the terrible autumn and the poor fields that yielded nothing. Geoff piles up wood and tinder; Benedict loads straw and fodder into the cart. Liam has brought an axe, while Salvius sends Tom the miller to retrieve the last remaining sack of flour from the mill.

The villagers are like the swallows I watched as a child at a cliffside near the sea—gathering, arguing, a swarm of rising fervor filling them. I remember the flock of birds moving as a mass—breaking, re-forming, ragged at the edges.

Finally, a few brave souls know that it is time to fly.

The men put their shoulders down and push against the cart. Every person in the village wants to touch the wood of it, as one would touch a baptized child. The outstretched hands seem to hold it back for a moment, and then, with a loud heave and the crack of breaking hoarfrost, the wheels roll forward. The shifting crowd gives a hollow cheer and surges in a mass.

It is a confusion of purposes. The cart is leaving the village, but at the same time, it is as if the whole village is going with us. There are dogs and small children underfoot, and mothers are wailing, their ululations echo against the trees.

The small children of the village who trail the cart are beginning to know that those dead are not coming back. The realization of their loss blanches them white—grief giving their cheeks and chins a gray pallor, corpse-like in this light.

Salvius leaps again upon the farm cart, his handsome face distorted by grief as he stands tall. His hair catches the dawn light, bright as wheat chaff. “We will not stop until we see the king—until we claim his protection and his justice. Our children’s bodies will testify to the murder. We go to the king in London!”

“Aye,” agrees Hob. “We take the bodies to the king—we seek justice, not vengeance!”

“What’s the difference?” shouts Geoff, and the crowd roars its approval.

There is one elation at the prospect of traveling, of going somewhere so far away it is almost mythical: London. The women pull the children close, keeping them away from the cart and its dangerous journey. Several stand up to Hob and Salvius and begin to badger their men to come home. They question Hob and Salvius openly, doubting this accusation against ghostly Jews in the forest, these will-o’-the-wisp murderers. Hob and Salvius do not deign to answer them.

For the spirit moves the men, just as it moves the wing’d creatures and rough beasts. I think of our first parents—Adam and Eve—as they staggered away from their paradise, thrust out of the garden by an avenging angel.

We are at the edge of the village commons now. After this point, we cannot turn back. We must find out who did this.

I am already weary, yet as I struggle to catch up with the cart, I know that I am really going because my son is going. I have no one else. My whole life is contained in that tortured, blackened husk. My child.

Where else would I go, but with him?

CHAPTER 3

STARS STEAM AWAY as a pale sun rises, hot coal dropped in a watery sky. Light seeps across the forest as the reedy shrieks of wood fowl echo in the trees.

The valley where our village of Duns rests is surrounded by forested hills. The path from our village to the King's Highway is no road at all; it is a crooked line of mud rutted with cart tracks, a rough trough where the dirty snow is stabbed through by the hooves of feral sheep. To the east, that faint track leads up through the forest until it reaches, finally, the open country and paths that lead to other places.

The flock of villagers around the cart thins now. At first, as we approach the last house of the village, it appears Hob and Salvius might be heading for the open ground of the graveyard, but then the cart passes that turning. Hob is taking us beyond the bounds of the known world, aiming for the White Road, the King's Highway.

Sophia, Benedict's wife, calls out to us. "Without a noble blessing, you lot take your lives in your hands!"

I know she is right. Peasants should have a tunic from a Lord of the Land, to show his blessing on our travels. Except for Benedict and his family, the others here do not have my knowledge of how the world works. I do not know if half of them have ever set foot outside the forest around our little vale.

These men have set, grim faces. They push on despite the warning. They are the fathers of the missing, and this drives them onward. And always, they look to Hob for direction.

Hob is sinewy and grizzled and humorless: sharp-eyed as a blackbird and possessed of the false merriment of one as well. Veins make ridges and valleys on his forehead and the backs of his leathery hands. Like maps, the lines on his hands point to destinations unreached.

Hob urges us on. The others need a leader as they stumble forward, nearly blind with grief. Near the front of our pack is stoic, brooding

Geoff, the carpenter. His eyes remain as dull and remote as ever, but his hands move constantly now, touching the cart, his side, his hat. It is as if his hands are puppets on a string, plucked by someone else's mind. Beside him is that layabout Liam, his bright red hair all awry, his lips moving with silent words I cannot hear, curses or prayers.

I am surprised to see both Liam and Geoff continue with us. Both of them are poor and aimless in their ambitions. They have naught with them for the journey, but—like the other men—they ignore their womenfolk and push forward.

The women like Sophia know the truth of adventures like the children's crusades, when people—young and old—wander from their villages onto the open road, trusting in God's providence, often to their own perdition or ruin. So the women collect the old, the infirm stragglers, the random children, and the feebleminded. Those too weak to go should not be pulled into the current of our passage, enticed down a path with no certain end.

One who does not need their help is Tom the miller, bullheaded and massive, who seems to move the cart almost by himself. His arms are heavy with muscle from the millwheel, his hands horned with calluses. Yet despite his brawn, his mouth is still full of those empty blustering words, those accusations. I think he talks so he won't have to think.

The thinking is done for us by Salvius, the blacksmith, the kindly one who gave me the wood to build my hut. He looks back for me from time to time. He looks back perhaps also to find his ward—young Cole, the orphan—who Salvius says he did not see this morning.

Salvius does what he can to encourage us, even as he looks up and down the trail. Cole has not yet been found, even among the dead.

Benedict, who owned the burned weaving house, is trying to push the cart, but at every step he is pulled backward by his wife. He shakes Sophia off time and time again, and in the end, she simply staggers after him, crying, no longer pulling at his coat.

I pass her slowly, my feet already wet and painful, weighted down by my solitary bag of rags and oddments. At this point in the morning, as the others fade away, Sophia is the only woman in the village still with the cart. I wonder if she is afraid of going back to the village alone. She

is known to have Jewish blood—even though her family converted when she was a babe in arms.

As I pass, Sophia turns to me, her face wet and heavy with sorrow.

“Ol’ Mear, this is a pilgrimage for fools—you can’t go on this journey.” She takes my arm gently. A few of the men nod in agreement, and look away.

But I lift my hands, I make gestures as forceful and angry as I can, trying to show them that I need to be with my son.

Still, she pulls me back toward the village. So I make a sound as only the mute would make. This time, as loud as I can muster: a keening howl.

There is an argument, Sophia’s voice high and strident, the men shouting back. Hob comes to us, muttering blackly under his breath. He sees my agonized face and makes the final decision. “Let ’im come. His only family lies here dead, isn’t that enough for ye?”

Salvius and Benedict push the cart ahead while Hob is separating Sophia from me, so Salvius misses when Geoff speaks up. “Aye, Salvius is going too, even though young Cole is back in t’ village.”

When I am free, I push myself forward and I go to Salvius, I pluck at his sleeve, and Salvius follows me. I point at Geoff, and Geoff repeats what he said, and explains further: “Sure, I saw Cole this morning, with water for the fire. He’s alive, in the village, I tell you.”

Salvius starts with surprise, and then he wraps his own cloak around my shoulders for the road ahead, wordlessly thanking me. He takes his belongings from the cart. He will go to find Cole.

“Take ’er with you too, won’t you?” says Hob. He points at Sophia, who is marooned in the road, standing like a weeping statue. Her beautiful black hair is caught by the breeze and whips around her face. Her white skin seems paper-thin in this light, and her eyelids flutter, as if she is caught in a terrible dream.

I think it is more than grief that keeps her here. Her incessant need, her grasping desire, is to own or hold onto all that she can. She always wants to hold the reins, to have what she cannot keep. But for the first time,

Benedict is pushing on without her, disappearing around the bend ahead, and she does not know what reins to seize.

Gently, Salvius takes her hands and turns her back toward the village. Sophia walks in a daze, but she will be safe with Salvius escorting her. Her face shines with tears as she stumbles backward, past us and down the road.

I see them go, and something quails in me, a cold thing turning across my grave. I am worried about us traveling on the open road without Salvius's sure confidence, his clear purpose, and his lordly manner. He directs men as few others do. We may be lost without him.



Fog lifts in the valley, rising as mist through the bare-limbed trees. Far below lies the deeping combe with our village in the heart of it.

My whole world for nearly a decade has been contained in that place—and now the village of Duns looks so small. I hold up my hand, form a circle with my fingers. The distant village, wreathed in mist, seems a child's plaything that I can hold in my own hand.

A great fallen yew with nurslings jutting evergreen from its broken body lies near our path. This is the very place at which I first saw the village ten years ago. The line of trees here on the ridge is unchanged, as if I came here only yesterday.

I waited in the quiet vale of Duns far too long. At first, it was a refuge, where I could hide my tracks and recover my strength after the vicious attack that drove me from my home and my books. Then I met Nell, and she gave me sanctuary, and in that comfort of her friendship, I remained for years.

Last spring, after Nell was killed, I knew the village was no longer safe: my haven was gone. But I had only a few months to wait until Christian was ten years of age, and then he could claim his birthright. One winter more and then we would have left together.

But now my son is gone—alone, without me—where I cannot follow until my ending comes in its turn.

Breathing deeply, I try to still my fear as I stare down at my wet feet in rags trudging through the snow. I step onto the sunken, snowy track, and I move beyond the fallen yew. Past this point exists a world—a life—known to me years ago. Ahead of us on the King’s Highway is a monastery, where lives a monk who spent much of summer beside me as I held my babe. He scribbled constantly, writing down the stories I told him. I wonder if he is still there.

Would any remember me now at that monastery on the road? And what of Canterbury Abbey far away? And the Court?

Do any remember my name, after all my years of silence and obscurity?



The cart rocks to a halt just before the crest of a long hill. The heavy weight of the bodies has sunk the cart deep into a rut, and a wheel sticks fast in slush and snow. Ice welds the cart hard to the hillside.

“Heave ho,” shouts Hob. “All as one, push together. Now!”

The first thrust from our shoulders doesn’t budge the cart. Not a bit.

Benedict glares at Geoff and me. “Come on, even you weak ones there, you push too!” Geoff the carpenter, stares back at Benedict. He still holds resentment toward the man whose house burned.

Hob puts his shoulder down. “Come now, men. Heave ho! Can’t you move it?”

But Liam mocks him, making a half-born attempt at a joke. “Oh yes, Hob—it’s me who’s holding it back. If I’d just lift my li’l finger, you’d move, you would.”

There’s a faint whisper of chuckling, but that dies quickly. No one dares laugh out loud at Hob. And these are our boys we carry.

Liam and Benedict push at the stuck cart. Hob and Tom lean their bodies against the heavy wooden wheels.

I come to the cart and take hold. I peer inside, I shuffle through the straw, trying to find more answers. The chaos I see slowly resolves into sense, like letters read in a forgotten language.

The bodies of our boys are thin and weak from the poor harvest this fall: I can see their bones. Yet these boys are clad in heavy cloaks and warm furs. They are wearing the most lordly clothes possessed by their families, as if they wished to make themselves look better than they are. These are the best garments of their meager homes.

The threads and fur are burned and tattered, so I know for truth that they wore such clothing to their deaths. Even as I flinch from the sight, that firm fork of logic seizes hard. *They were in a house, not on the road. No one had planned a journey, that I knew of. So why were these dead boys wearing furs and cloaks?*

The cart does not move, despite our efforts; instead, one wheel sinks deeper into the snow.

Hob bends down and digs with his hands. He barks hoarsely at us in his commanding tone. “You lot, find summat to wedge it out—branches, wood, straw—anything to get this wheel out.”

Reluctantly, I leave behind the puzzle of the boys’ clothing. We step into the forest and spread out, trying to find spare wood.

Sound carries far here in the trees. Snow slides off a heavy oak as some creature shuffles through the woods, and ancient branches snap. Out of the corner of one eye, I see the flash of colored feathers. It is a yellowhammer, black eyes flickering in a hedgerow, tiny breast plumped out in golden livery, streaked with colors rich and brown. It was calling in its winter song:

A little bit of bread and no cheese—

A little bit of bread and no cheese—

Moments later, the bracken flutters and the slight shadow of the bird darts into the woods. Deep in the forest now, I hear a low voice that wends back and forth, whispering in secret. It is one of our party. I edge my way closer, stepping quietly so I can hear.

“Why were they together that night?” In this close copse, I can hear the whisper louder by some trick of the woods. “It’s a lie, I tell you—they’re lying to us!”

It is the small carpenter, Geoff, speaking with a dour look.

I have always found him distasteful. Perhaps it is but the memory I have of Nell whispering to me of his father: a man who defiled his own son. On that man’s deathbed, she said, there were running sores on his flesh, the price of Gomorrah. Nothing she could give would help him, and no one believed the rumors of him.

And she was killed for it.

Geoff, now a man himself, has his father’s choleric looks. He bears the same harsh voice, the same dark flickering eyes. I wonder if his father’s desires run in his mind, in the blood.

Geoff is speaking to Liam as they push their way through the woods, searching for loose branches. “Our lads were takin’ a journey—they were dressed in warm cloaks an’ furs!”

Geoff has seen what I saw.

But Liam isn’t listening. Instead, he interrupts before Geoff can speak again. “You’ve got to promise me to tell no one of my crime. You know what I did. Benedict knows it too. But keep my secret, an’—” begins Liam. Then my footsteps through the rotten snow, and a branch cracks.

I tumble forward out of my hiding spot. Liam starts with sudden fear. He drops the wood he has collected.

But I stumble forward, keeping my face incurious, even while my heart churns. *What secret?* I wish Salvius were still here, to find the truth of this. He would know what to do. *What crime does Liam conceal?*

When they see it is only me in the snow, they pick up their wood again. Liam nods his head in greeting, gives me a wink. “Mear knows the truth of all things, dontcha know? Pity ’e can’t talk.”

Geoff grimaces. He stoops and lifts a pair of twigs out of the thin snow in this copse. “An’ I’ll ask you this—why the rush to get on the trail at first light?”

“Aye, an’ we have no blessing for the open road.”

“Why does that matter?” says Geoff.

Liam grimaces. “Without that, we can be taken, dontcha know? Any man can kill us.”

I am surprised that Liam knows this. He is right that we have no sanction from the Lord of our County, Sir Peter of Lincoln, for this journey. And without an embroidered Lord’s tunic, or some such blessing—some holy writ of Church or King would serve—we are prey, subject to any man’s whim or greed.

“How do you know?” Geoff shakes his head.

“I’ve been out here before. I’ve seen it happen,” whispers Liam. And this is a surprise to me too—for years, I have thought Liam was born and bred in the village of Duns.

“There’s a liar here somewhere,” continues Liam. “After all, the house with boys in it was tied shut, from outside. Salvius and I had to break the door to get the bodies out.”

The knot. I have a sudden vision of the boys pushing helplessly on the door, striving to get out as the knot holds tight. Smoke overwhelmed them. My eyes fill with tears.

Liam rips a branch from a small tree, his hands shaking with anger. “Before this journey is done, I tell you, I will know why they were gather’d together. Why did this happen?”

“I blame Benedict,” says Geoff. “It was his house, and the first fire this winter where someone died. I don’t believe his story of the boys weaving—not for a moment. Here’s my guess—what if the boys were seeing his wife already?”

My heart sinks. Sophia, even in her fathomless need, would not seduce boys so young, would she? Liam gives his face a sardonic twist, a leer

that makes his grin unseemly. My skin goes cold at that look. It makes me doubt him more. Liam always has been at the bottom of the village bounty, scraping the dregs. What if his need finally broke him and he took vengeance on his betters?

A loud bellow echoes from far away, on the other side of the hill. It is Hob's voice. Liam and Geoff lift their heavy load of branches, and we start back.



The skewed cart lies like a foundered ship in the drift of snow. I take my turn digging wearily at the frost-hardened ground; then I reach down to rub my painful feet, and I see a boy in a hooded cloak. He stands on the other side of the cart, pushing alongside us.

For a moment, my eyes are bewitched. I see Christian standing alive and hale again. That moment lasts a long breath, and then it is gone.

The boy's hood drops off his head.

Raven-black hair. Sunken coal-black eyes.

It is only Cole.

He is Salvius's misbegotten ward, the orphan. But he is here alone. Hob talks to him, asking of his "Uncle Salvius."

I cannot hear all they say, but it seems Cole was in the woods and found us on the trail. He points at the cart, gesturing toward his dead friends. Hob's face is hard and untrusting.

Cole has the curse of lying and of theft. Few folk trust him, least of all Salvius who often must punish him for his many misdeeds. And Cole's face is etched by the scars of ringworm. Such marks are said to be the mark of a devil or a witch, and those scarred are mocked and called by names, so as to torment the devil inside. I do not know the truth of it. I do not concern myself.

He is a gangly, overgrown orphan boy from the edge of the village, the one some whisper was abandoned by his own mother. Perhaps they said the same about my Christian.

In fact, Cole once helped me watch my son. He is a little older than the boys who died but always he drifts toward those younger than he. For Cole has a wandering stammer, and no one treats him as a man. His weak voice is the last echo of the tenderness I once saw in that lad.

Cole says he sought us out, hoping he would find Salvius here, wanting to honor his dead friends.

I think that Cole is like the other children—he will spend the heat of this winter day walking with us, but he will fade eventually, when he wearies of the hard track and the heavy cart. In fact, even now, I can see a few of the other children in the valley below, wandering back along the switchbacks toward the distant village.

“Cole can come with us,” says Hob. “It’s too late in the day to send for Salvius.”

“Let’s go back ourselves,” says Geoff. “You’re right. It’s late—I’m damn’d tired.”

“None of us are going back!” Bene seizes Geoff’s head with his great weaver’s hands. He turns Geoff, forces him to look up at the trail ahead. “Look at the tracks, I say, look at them!”

We all stare at the hillside. The virgin snow is spattered with bootprints that go out of sight.

“We’re followin’ the villain, can’t you see?” says Bene. “The tracks are—”

Geoff wrenches his head out of Benedict’s grasp. “To hell with yer tracks! My son is gone—he ain’t comin’ back.”

“Push on,” calls Hob, and Geoff’s complaints are ignored. The cart tilts forward this time and out of the ditch. Red-haired Liam and I both hold now to the branches of the whippetree in front, guiding the way forward.

Hob moves behind me then, goading us to the work. He spits on the ground and slaps our shoulders. I am the only one to follow his gaze and glance behind us. He is staring into the distance, along our backtrail.

Deep in the vale, a large puff of steam or snow punches into the air. A rider. I watch closely. Some group of people—another cart—follows along the adjoining trail, but I cannot see them in the trees.

Hob touches Benedict's elbow and whispers low. Benedict's cheek twitches, and he scratches anxiously at his bald scalp. Hob glances back again, then he shouts loud, urging more miles before nightfall. I put my shoulder to the cart.

We are pushed onward by the force of their will.

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ISBNs: E-Book: 978-0-9852393-1-2 Hardcover: 978-0-9852393-0-5
Audiobook: 978-0-9852393-2-9