THE MAGNIFICENT SEQUEL TO
THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH

KEN FOLLETT

WORLD WITHOUT END

'You won't be able to put it down'
Independent

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WORLD WITHOUT END

KEN FOLLETT was only twenty-seven when he wrote the award-winning *Eye of the Needle*, which became an international bestseller. He has since written several equally successful novels, including, most recently, *Whiteout*. *World Without End* is the long-awaited sequel to the worldwide bestselling *The Pillars of the Earth*, the epic of family drama, violent conflict and vaulting ambition set around the building of a great cathedral. Ken Follett is also the author of a non-fiction bestseller, *On Wings of Eagles*. He lives with his family in London and Hertfordshire.

WORLD WITHOUT END

'Follett excels in telling a yarn. Intrigue, double-twists, exciting, satisfying . . you won't be able to put it down'
Independent

'This is a huge book in every way, sweeping and yet detailed, a powerful story packed with superbly drawn characters and which brilliantly evokes the period that saw the devastating Black Death plague and the birth of modern medicine'
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THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH

'Enormous and brilliant . . . this mammoth tale seems to touch all human emotion – love and hate, loyalty and treachery, hope and despair. See for yourself. This is truly a novel to get lost in'
Cosmopolitan

'A historical saga of such breadth and density . . Follett succeeds brilliantly in combining hugeness and detail to create a novel imbued with the rawness, violence and blind faith of the era'
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For Barbara

Part One

1 November, 1327

1

GWENDA WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD, but she was not afraid of the dark.

When she opened her eyes she could see nothing, but that was not what scared her. She knew where she was. She was at Kingsbridge Priory, in the long stone building they called the hospital, lying on the floor in a bed of straw. Her mother lay next to her, and Gwenda could tell, by the warm milky smell, that Ma was feeding the new baby, who did not yet have a name. Beside Ma was Pa, and next to him Gwenda's older brother, Philemon, who was twelve.

The hospital was crowded, and though she could not see the other families lying along the floor, squashed together like sheep in a pen, she could smell the rank odour of their warm bodies. When dawn broke it would be All Hallows, a Sunday this year and therefore an especially holy day. By the same token the night before was All Hallows' Eve, a dangerous time when evil spirits roamed freely. Hundreds of people had come to Kingsbridge from the surrounding villages, as Gwenda's family had, to spend Halloween in the sanctified precincts of the priory, and to attend the All Hallows service at daybreak.

Gwenda was wary of evil spirits, like every sensible person; but she was more scared of what she had to do during the service.

She stared into the gloom, trying not to think about what frightened her. She knew that the wall opposite her had an arched window. There was no glass – only the most important buildings had glass windows – but a linen blind kept out the cold autumn air. However, she could not see even a faint patch of grey where the window should be. She was glad. She did not want the morning to come.

She could see nothing, but there was plenty to listen to. The

straw that covered the floor whispered constantly as people stirred and shifted in their sleep. A child cried out, as if woken by a dream, and was quickly silenced by a murmured endearment. Now and again someone spoke, uttering the half-formed words of sleep talk. Somewhere there was the sound of two people doing the thing parents did but never spoke of, the thing Gwenda called Grunting because she had no other word for it.

Too soon, there was a light. At the eastern end of the long room, behind the altar, a monk came through the door carrying a single candle. He put the candle down on the altar, lit a taper from it, and went around touching the flame to the wall lamps, his long shadow reaching up the wall each time like a reflection, his taper meeting the shadow taper at the wick of the lamp.

The strengthening light illuminated rows of humped figures on the floor, wrapped in their drab cloaks or huddled up to their neighbours for warmth. Sick people occupied the cots near the altar, where they could get the maximum benefit from the holiness of the place. At the opposite end, a staircase led to the upper floor where there were rooms for aristocratic visitors: the earl of Shiring was there now with some of his family.

The monk leaned over Gwenda to light the lamp above her head. He caught her eye and smiled. She studied his face in the shifting light of the flame and recognized him as Brother Godwyn. He was young and handsome, and last night he had spoken kindly to Philemon.

Beside Gwenda was another family from her village: Samuel, a prosperous peasant with a large landholding, and his wife and two sons, the younger of whom, Wulfric, was an annoying six-year-old who thought that throwing acorns at girls then running away was the funniest thing in the world.

Gwenda's family was not prosperous. Her father had no land at all, and hired himself out as a labourer to anyone who would pay him. There was always work in the summer but, after the harvest was gathered in and the weather began to turn cold, the family often went hungry.

That was why Gwenda had to steal.

She imagined being caught: a strong hand grabbing her arm,

holding her in an unbreakable grip while she wriggled helplessly; a deep, cruel voice saying, 'Well, well, a little thief'; the pain and humiliation of a whipping; and then, worst of all, the agony and loss as her hand was chopped off.

Her father had suffered this punishment. At the end of his left arm was a hideous wrinkled stump. He managed well with one hand – he could use a shovel, saddle a horse and even make a net to catch birds – but all the same he was always the last labourer to be hired in the spring, and the first to be laid off in the autumn. He could never leave the village and seek work elsewhere, because the amputation marked him as a thief, so that people would refuse to hire him. When travelling, he tied a stuffed glove to the stump, to avoid being shunned by every stranger he met; but that did not fool people for long.

Gwenda had not witnessed Pa's punishment – it had happened before she was born – but she had often imagined it, and now she could not help thinking about the same thing happening to her. In her mind she saw the blade of the axe coming down on her wrist, slicing through her skin and her bones, and severing her hand from her arm, so that it could never be reattached; and she had to clamp her teeth together to keep from screaming out loud.

People were standing up, stretching and yawning and rubbing their faces. Gwenda got up and shook out her clothes. All her garments had previously belonged to her older brother. She wore a woollen shift that came down to her knees and a tunic over it, gathered at the waist with a belt made of hemp cord. Her shoes had once been laced, but the eyelets were torn and the laces gone, and she tied them to her feet with plaited straw. When she had tucked her hair into a cap made of squirrel tails, she had finished dressing.

She caught her father's eye, and he pointed surreptitiously to a family across the way, a couple in middle age with two sons a little older than Gwenda. The man was short and slight, with a curly red beard. He was buckling on a sword, which meant he was a man-at-arms or a knight: ordinary people were not allowed to wear swords. His wife was a thin woman with a brisk manner

and a grumpy face. As Gwenda scrutinized them, Brother Godwyn nodded respectfully and said: 'Good morning, Sir Gerald, Lady Maud.'

Gwenda saw what had attracted her father's notice. Sir Gerald had a purse attached to his belt by a leather thong. The purse bulged. It looked as if it contained several hundred of the small, thin silver pennies, halfpennies and farthings that were the English currency – as much money as Pa could earn in a year if he had been able to find employment. It would be more than enough to feed the family until the spring ploughing. The purse might even contain a few foreign gold coins, florins from Florence or ducats from Venice.

Gwenda had a small knife in a wooden sheath hanging from a cord around her neck. The sharp blade would quickly cut the thong and cause the fat purse to fall into her small hand – unless Sir Gerald felt something strange and grabbed her before she could do the deed...

Godwyn raised his voice over the rumble of talk. 'For the love of Christ, who teaches us charity, breakfast will be provided after the All Hallows service,' he said. 'Meanwhile, there is pure drinking water in the courtyard fountain. Please remember to use the latrines outside – no pissing indoors!'

The monks and nuns were strict about cleanliness. Last night, Godwyn had caught a six-year-old boy peeing in a corner, and had expelled the whole family. Unless they had a penny for a tavern, they would have had to spend the cold October night shivering on the stone floor of the cathedral's north porch. There was also a ban on animals. Gwenda's three-legged dog, Hop, had been banished. She wondered where he had spent the night.

When all the lamps were lit, Godwyn opened the big wooden door to the outside. The night air bit sharply at Gwenda's ears and the tip of her nose. The overnight guests pulled their coats around them and began to shuffle out. When Sir Gerald and his family moved off, Pa and Ma fell into line behind them, and Gwenda and Philemon followed suit.

Philemon had done the stealing until now, but yesterday he had almost been caught, at Kingsbridge Market. He had palmed a

small jar of expensive oil from the booth of an Italian merchant, then he had dropped the jar, so that everyone saw it. Mercifully, it had not broken when it hit the ground. He had been forced to pretend that he had accidentally knocked it off the stall.

Until recently Philemon had been small and unobtrusive, like Gwenda, but in the last year he had grown several inches, developed a deep voice, and become awkward and clumsy, as if he could not get used to his new, larger body. Last night, after the incident with the jar of oil, Pa had announced that Philemon was now too big for serious thieving, and henceforth it was Gwenda's job.

That was why she had lain awake for so much of the night.

Philemon's name was really Holger. When he was ten years old, he had decided he was going to be a monk, so he told everyone he had changed his name to Philemon, which sounded more religious. Surprisingly, most people had gone along with his wish, though Ma and Pa still called him Holger.

They passed through the door and saw two lines of shivering nuns holding burning torches to light the pathway from the hospital to the great west door of Kingsbridge Cathedral. Shadows flickered at the edges of the torchlight, as if the imps and hobgoblins of the night were cavorting just out of sight, kept at a distance only by the sanctity of the nuns.

Gwenda half expected to see Hop waiting outside, but he was not there. Perhaps he had found somewhere warm to sleep. As they walked to the church, Pa made sure they stayed close to Sir Gerald. From behind, someone tugged painfully at Gwenda's hair. She squealed, thinking it was a goblin; but when she turned she saw Wulfric, her six-year-old neighbour. He darted out of her reach, laughing. Then his father growled 'Behave!' and smacked his head, and the little boy began to cry.

The vast church was a shapeless mass towering above the huddled crowd. Only the lowest parts were distinct, arches and mullions picked out in orange and red by the uncertain torchlight. The procession slowed as it approached the cathedral entrance, and Gwenda could see a group of townspeople coming from the opposite direction. There were hundreds of them,

Gwenda thought, maybe thousands, although she was not sure how many people made a thousand, for she could not count that high.

The crowd inched through the vestibule. The restless light of the torches fell on the sculpted figures around the walls, making them dance madly. At the lowest level were demons and monsters. Gwenda stared uneasily at dragons and griffins, a bear with a man's head, a dog with two bodies and one muzzle. Some of the demons struggled with humans: a devil put a noose around a man's neck, a fox-like monster dragged a woman by her hair, an eagle with hands speared a naked man. Above these scenes the saints stood in a row under sheltering canopies; over them the apostles sat on thrones; then, in the arch over the main door, St Peter with his key and St Paul with a scroll looked adoringly upwards at Jesus Christ.

Gwenda knew that Jesus was telling her not to sin, or she would be tortured by demons; but humans frightened her more than demons. If she failed to steal Sir Gerald's purse, she would be whipped by her father. Worse, there would be nothing for the family to eat but soup made with acorns. She and Philemon would be hungry for weeks on end. Ma's breasts would dry up, and the new baby would die, as the last two had. Pa would disappear for days, and come back with nothing for the pot but a scrawny heron or a couple of squirrels. Being hungry was worse than being whipped – it hurt longer.

She had been taught to pilfer at a young age: an apple from a stall, a new-laid egg from under a neighbour's hen, a knife dropped carelessly on a tavern table by a drunk. But stealing money was different. If she were caught robbing Sir Gerald it would be no use bursting into tears and hoping to be treated as a naughty child, as she had once after thieving a pair of dainty leather shoes from a soft-hearted nun. Cutting the strings of a knight's purse was no childish peccadillo, it was a real grown-up crime, and she would be treated accordingly.

She tried not to think about it. She was small and nimble and quick, and she would take the purse stealthily, like a ghost – provided she could keep from trembling.

The wide church was already thronged with people. In the

side aisles, hooded monks held torches that cast a restless red glow. The marching pillars of the nave reached up into darkness. Gwenda stayed close to Sir Gerald as the crowd pushed forward towards the altar. The red-bearded knight and his thin wife did not notice her. Their two boys paid no more attention to her than to the stone walls of the cathedral. Gwenda's family fell back and she lost sight of them.

The nave filled up quickly. Gwenda had never seen so many people in one place: it was busier than the cathedral green on market day. People greeted one another cheerfully, feeling safe from evil spirits in this holy place, and the sound of all their conversations mounted to a roar.

Then the bell tolled, and they fell silent.

Sir Gerald was standing by a family from the town. They all wore cloaks of fine cloth, so they were probably rich wool dealers. Next to the knight stood a girl about ten years old. Gwenda stood behind Sir Gerald and the girl. She tried to make herself inconspicuous but, to her dismay, the girl looked at her and smiled reassuringly, as if to tell her not to be frightened.

Around the edges of the crowd the monks extinguished their torches, one by one, until the great church was in utter darkness.

Gwenda wondered if the rich girl would remember her later. She had not merely glanced at Gwenda then ignored her, as most people did. She had noticed her, had thought about her, had anticipated that she might be scared, and had given her a friendly smile. But there were hundreds of children in the cathedral. She could not have got a very clear impression of Gwenda's features in the dim light ... could she? Gwenda tried to put the worry out of her mind.

Invisible in the darkness, she stepped forward and slipped noiselessly between the two figures, feeling the soft wool of the girl's cloak on one side and the stiffer fabric of the knight's old surcoat on the other. Now she was in a position to get at the purse.

She reached into her neckline and took the little knife from its sheath.

The silence was broken by a terrible scream. Gwenda had been expecting it – Ma had explained what was going to happen

during the service – but, all the same, she was shocked. It sounded like someone being tortured.

Then there was a harsh drumming sound, as of someone beating on a metal plate. More noises followed: wailing, mad laughter, a hunting horn, a rattle, animal noises, a cracked bell. In the congregation, a child started to cry, and others joined in. Some of the adults laughed nervously. They knew the noises were made by the monks, but all the same it was a hellish cacophony.

This was not the moment to take the purse, Gwenda thought fearfully. Everyone was tense, alert. The knight would be sensitive to any touch.

The devilish noise grew louder, then a new sound intervened: music. At first it was so soft that Gwenda was not sure she had really heard it, then gradually it grew louder. The nuns were singing. Gwenda felt her body flood with tension. The moment was approaching. Moving like a spirit, imperceptible as the air, she turned so that she was facing Sir Gerald.

She knew exactly what he was wearing. He had on a heavy wool robe gathered at the waist by a broad studded belt. His purse was tied to the belt with a leather thong. Over the robe he wore an embroidered surcoat, costly but worn, with yellowing bone buttons down the front. He had done up some of the buttons, but not all, probably out of sleepy laziness, or because the walk from the hospital to the church was so short.

With a touch as light as possible, Gwenda put one small hand on his coat. She imagined her hand was a spider, so weightless that he could not possibly feel it. She ran her spider hand across the front of his coat and found the opening. She slipped her hand under the edge of the coat and along his heavy belt until she came to the purse.

The pandemonium faded as the music grew louder. From the front of the congregation came a murmur of awe. Gwenda could see nothing, but she knew that a lamp had been lit on the altar, illuminating a reliquary, an elaborately carved ivory-and-gold box holding the bones of St Adolphus, that had not been there when the lights went out. The crowd surged forward, everyone trying to get closer to the holy remains. As Gwenda felt herself squashed

between Sir Gerald and the man in front of him, she brought up her right hand and put the edge of the knife to the thong of his purse.

The leather was tough, and her first stroke did not cut it. She sawed frantically with the knife, hoping desperately that Sir Gerald was too interested in the scene at the altar to notice what was happening under his nose. She glanced upwards and realized she could just about see the outlines of people around her: the monks and nuns were lighting candles. The light would get brighter every moment. She had no time left.

She gave a fierce yank on the knife, and felt the thong give. Sir Gerald grunted quietly: had he felt something, or was he reacting to the spectacle at the altar? The purse dropped, and landed in her hand; but it was too big for her to grasp easily, and it slipped. For a terrifying moment she thought she was going to drop it and lose it on the floor among the heedless feet of the crowd; then she got a grip on it and held it.

She felt a moment of joyous relief: she had the purse.

But she was still in terrible danger. Her heart was beating so loudly she felt as if everyone must be able to hear it. She turned quickly so that her back was to the knight. In the same movement, she stuffed the heavy purse down the front of her tunic. She could feel that it made a bulge that would be conspicuous, hanging over her belt like an old man's belly. She shifted it around to her side, where it was partly covered by her arm. It would still be visible when the lights brightened, but she had nowhere else to put it.

She sheathed the knife. Now she had to get away quickly, before Sir Gerald noticed his loss – but the crush of worshippers, which had helped her take the purse unnoticed, now hindered her escape. She tried to step backwards, hoping to force a gap in the bodies behind her, but everyone was still pressing forward to look at the bones of the saint. She was trapped, unable to move, right in front of the man she had robbed.

A voice in her ear said: 'Are you all right?'

It was the rich girl. Gwenda fought down panic. She needed to be invisible. A helpful older child was the last thing she wanted. She said nothing.