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KEN FOLLETT

THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH

A SIGNET BOOK

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To Marie-Claire,
the apple of my eye

Chapter 2

PETER OF WAREHAM was a born troublemaker.

He had been transferred to the little cell in the forest from the mother house at Kingsbridge, and it was easy to see why the prior of Kingsbridge had been anxious to get rid of him. A tall, rangy man in his late twenties, he had a powerful intellect and a scornful manner, and he lived in a permanent state of righteous indignation. When he first arrived and started working in the fields he had set a furious pace and then accused others of laziness. However, to his surprise most of the monks had been able to keep up with him, and eventually the younger ones had tired him out. He had then looked for a vice other than idleness, and his second choice had been gluttony.

He began by eating only half his bread and none of his meat. He drank water from streams during the day, diluted his beer, and refused wine. He reprimanded a healthy young monk who asked for more porridge, and reduced to tears a boy who playfully drank another's wine.

The monks showed little evidence of gluttony, Prior Philip thought as they walked back from the hilltop to the monastery at dinnertime. The youngsters were lean and muscular, and the older men were sunburned and wiry. Not one of them had the pale, soft roundness that came from having plenty to eat and nothing to do. Philip thought all monks should be thin. Fat monks provoked poor men to envy and hatred of God's servants.

Characteristically, Peter had disguised his accusation as a confession. "I have been guilty of the sin of gluttony," he had said this morning, when they were taking a break, sitting on the trees they had felled, eating rye bread and drinking beer. "I have disobeyed the Rule of Saint Benedict, which says that monks must not eat meat nor drink wine." He looked around at the others, his head high and his dark eyes blazing with pride, and he let his gaze rest finally on Philip. "And every one here is guilty of the same sin," he finished.

It was very sad that Peter should be like this, Philip

thought. The man was dedicated to God's work, and he had a fine mind and great strength of purpose. But he seemed to have a compelling need to feel special and be noticed by others all the time; and this drove him to create scenes. He was a real nuisance, but Philip loved him as much as any of them, for Philip could see, behind the arrogance and the scorn, a troubled soul who did not really believe that anyone could possibly care for him.

Philip had said: "This gives us an opportunity to recall what Saint Benedict said on this topic. Do you remember his exact words, Peter?"

"He says: 'All but the sick should abstain from meat,' and then: 'Wine is not the drink of monks at all,' " Peter replied.

Philip nodded. As he had suspected, Peter did not know the rule as well as Philip. "Almost correct, Peter," he said. "The saint did not refer to meat, but to 'the flesh of four-footed animals,' and even so he made exceptions, not just for the sick, but also for the weak. What did he mean by 'the weak'? Here in our little community, we take the view that men who have been weakened by strenuous work in the fields may need to eat beef now and then to keep up their strength."

Peter had listened to this in sullen silence, his brow creased with disapproval, his heavy black eyebrows drawn together over the bridge of his large curved nose, his face a mask of suppressed defiance.

Philip had gone on: "On the subject of wine, the saint says: 'We read that wine is not the drink of monks at all.' The use of the words *we read* implies that he does not wholly endorse the proscription. He also says that a pint of wine a day should be sufficient for anyone. And he warns us not to drink to satiety. It is clear, is it not, that he does not expect monks to abstain totally?"

"But he says that frugality should be maintained in everything," Peter said.

"And you say we are not frugal here?" Philip asked him.

"I do," he said in a ringing voice.

" 'Let those to whom God gives the gift of abstinence know that they shall receive their proper reward,' " Philip quoted. "If you feel that the food here is too generous, you may eat less. But remember what else the saint says. He quotes the first epistle to the Corinthians, in which Saint Paul says: 'Every one has his proper gift from God, one thus, another thus.' And then the saint tells us: 'For this reason, the amount of other people's food cannot be determined without some misgiving.' Please remember that, Peter, as you fast and meditate upon the sin of gluttony."

They had gone back to work then, Peter wearing a martyred air. He was not going to be silenced so easily, Philip realized. Of the monks' three vows, of poverty, chastity and obedience, the one that gave Peter trouble was obedience.

There were ways of dealing with disobedient monks, of course: solitary confinement, bread and water, flogging, and ultimately excommunication and expulsion from the house. Philip did not normally hesitate to use such punishments, especially when a monk seemed to be testing Philip's authority. Consequently he was thought of as a tough disciplinarian. But in fact he hated meting out punishment—it brought disharmony into the monastic brotherhood and made everyone unhappy. Anyway, in the case of Peter, punishment would do no good at all—indeed, it would serve to make the man more prideful and unforgiving. Philip had to find a way to control Peter and soften him at the same time. It would not be easy. But then, he thought, if everything were easy, men would not need God's guidance.

They reached the clearing in the forest where the monastery was. As they walked across the open space, Philip saw Brother John waving energetically at them from the goat pen. He was called Johnny Eightpence, and he was a little soft in the head. Philip wondered what he was excited about now. With Johnny was a man in priest's robes. He looked vaguely familiar, and Philip hurried toward him.

The priest was a short, compact man in his middle twenties, with close-cropped black hair and bright blue eyes that twinkled with alert intelligence. Looking at him was for Philip like looking in a mirror. The priest, he realized with a shock, was his younger brother Francis.

And Francis was holding a newborn baby.

Philip did not know which was more surprising, Francis or the baby. The monks all crowded around. Francis stood up and handed the baby to Johnny; then Philip embraced him. "What are you doing here?" Philip said delightedly. "And why have you got a baby?"

"I'll tell you later why I'm here," Francis said. "As for the baby, I found him in the woods, all alone, lying near a blazing fire." Francis stopped.

"And . . ." Philip prompted him.

Francis shrugged. "I can't tell you any more than that, because that's all I know. I was hoping to get here last night, but I didn't quite make it, so I spent the night in a verderer's hut. I left at dawn this morning, and I was riding along the road when I heard a baby cry. A moment later I saw it. I picked it up and brought it here. That's the whole tale."

Philip looked incredulously at the tiny bundle in Johnny's arms. He reached out a hand tentatively, and lifted a corner of the blanket. He saw a wrinkled pink face, an open toothless mouth and a little bald head—a miniature of an aging monk. He unwrapped the bundle a little more and saw tiny fragile shoulders, waving arms, and tight-clenched fists. He looked closely at the stump of the umbilical cord which hung from the baby's navel. It was faintly disgusting. Was this natural? Philip wondered. It looked like a wound that was healing well, and would be best left alone. He pulled the blanket down farther still. "A boy," he said with an embarrassed cough, and covered it up again. One of the novices giggled.

Philip suddenly felt helpless. What on earth am I to do with it? he thought. Feed it?

The baby cried, and the sound tugged at his heartstrings like a well-loved hymn. "It's hungry," he said, and he thought in the back of his mind: How did I know that?

One of the monks said: "We can't feed it."

Philip was about to say: Why not? Then he realized why not: there were no women for miles.

However, Johnny had already solved that problem, Philip now saw. Johnny sat down on the stool with the baby in his lap. He had in his hand a towel with one corner twisted into a spiral. He dipped the corner into a pail of milk, let the towel soak up some of the liquid, then put the cloth to the baby's mouth. The baby opened its mouth, sucked on the towel, and swallowed.

Philip felt like cheering. "That was clever, Johnny," he said in surprise.

Johnny grinned. "I've done it before, when a nanny goat died before her kid was weaned," he said proudly.

All the monks watched intently as Johnny repeated the simple action of dipping the towel and letting the baby suck. As he touched the towel to the baby's lips, some of the monks would open their own mouths, Philip saw with amusement. It was a slow way of feeding the baby, but no doubt feeding babies was a slow business anyway.

Peter of Wareham, who had succumbed to the general fascination with the baby and consequently had forgotten to be critical of anything for some time, now recovered himself and said: "It would be less trouble to find the child's mother."

Francis said: "I doubt it. The mother is probably unmarried, and was overtaken in moral transgression. I imagine she is young. Perhaps she managed to keep her pregnancy secret; then, when her time was near, she came out into the

forest, and built a fire; gave birth alone, then abandoned the child to the wolves and went back to wherever she came from. She will make sure she can't be found."

The baby had fallen asleep. On impulse, Philip took it from Johnny. He held it to his chest, supporting it with his hand, and rocked it. "The poor thing," he said. "The poor, poor thing." The urge to protect and care for the baby suffused him like a flush. He noticed that the monks were staring at him, astonished at his sudden display of tenderness. They had never seen him caress anyone, of course, for physical affection was strictly prohibited in the monastery. Obviously they had thought him incapable of it. Well, he thought, they know the truth now.

Peter of Wareham spoke again. "We'll have to take the child to Winchester, then, and try to find a foster mother."

If this had been said by anyone else, Philip might not have been so quick to contradict it; but Peter said it, and Philip spoke hastily, and his life was never quite the same afterward. "We're not going to give him to a foster mother," he said decisively. "This child is a gift from God." He looked around at them all. The monks gazed back at him wide-eyed, hanging on his words. "We'll take care of him ourselves," he went on. "We'll feed him, and teach him, and bring him up in the ways of God. Then, when he is a man, he will become a monk himself, and that way we will give him back to God."

There was a stunned silence.

Then Peter said angrily: "It's impossible! A baby cannot be brought up by monks!"

Philip caught his brother's eye, and they both smiled, sharing memories. When Philip spoke again, his voice was heavy with the weight of the past. "Impossible? No, Peter. On the contrary, I'm quite sure it can be done, and so is my brother. We know from experience. Don't we, Francis?"

On the day Philip now thought of as the last day, his father had come home wounded.

Philip had been the first to see him, riding up the twisting hillside path to the little hamlet in mountainous North Wales. Six-year-old Philip ran out to meet him, as usual; but this time Da did not swing his little boy up onto the horse in front of him. He was riding slowly, slumped in the saddle, holding the reins in his right hand, his left arm hanging limp. His face was pale and his clothes were splashed with blood. Philip was at once intrigued and scared, for he had never seen his father appear weak.

Da said: "Fetch your mother."

When they got him into the house, Mam cut off his shirt. Philip was horrified: the sight of his thrifty mother willfully ruining good clothes was more shocking than the blood. "Don't worry about me now," Da had said, but his normal bark had weakened to a murmur and nobody took any notice—another shocking event, for normally his word was law. "Leave me, and get everyone up to the monastery," he said. "The damned English will be here soon." There was a monastery with a church at the top of the hill, but Philip could not understand why they should go there when it was not even Sunday. Mam said: "If you lose any more blood you won't be able to go anywhere, ever." But Auntie Gwen said she would raise the alarm, and went out.

Years later, when he thought about the events that followed, Philip realized that at this moment everyone had forgotten about him and his four-year-old brother, Francis, and nobody thought to take them to the safety of the monastery. People were thinking of their own children, and assumed that Philip and Francis were all right because they were with their parents; but Da was bleeding to death and Mam was trying to save him, and so it happened that the English caught all four of them.

Nothing in Philip's short experience of life had prepared him for the appearance of the two men-at-arms as they kicked the door open and burst into the one-room house. In other circumstances they would not have been frightening, for they were the kind of big, clumsy adolescents who mocked old women and abused Jews and got into fistfights outside alehouses at midnight. But now (Philip understood years later, when at last he was able to think objectively about that day) the two young men were possessed by bloodlust. They had been in a battle, they had heard men scream in agony and seen friends fall down dead, and they had been scared, literally, out of their wits. But they had won the battle and survived, and now they were in hot pursuit of their enemies, and nothing could satisfy them but more blood, more screaming, more wounds and more death; and all this was written on their twisted faces as they came into the room like foxes into a henhouse.

They moved very fast, but Philip could remember each step forever afterward, as if it had all taken a very long time. Both men wore light armor, just a short vest of chain mail and a leather helmet with iron bands. Both had their swords drawn. One was ugly, with a big bent nose and a squint, and his teeth were bared in a dreadful ape-like grin. The other