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KEN FOLLETT

A NOVEL



CIRCLE
of DAYS

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A NOVEL

KEN
FOLLETT



GRAND
CENTRAL

NEW YORK BOSTON

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Map](#)

[The story begins around the year 2500 B.C.E.](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[Ten midwinters pass](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)

[35](#)

[**Fifteen more midwinters pass**](#)

[36](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

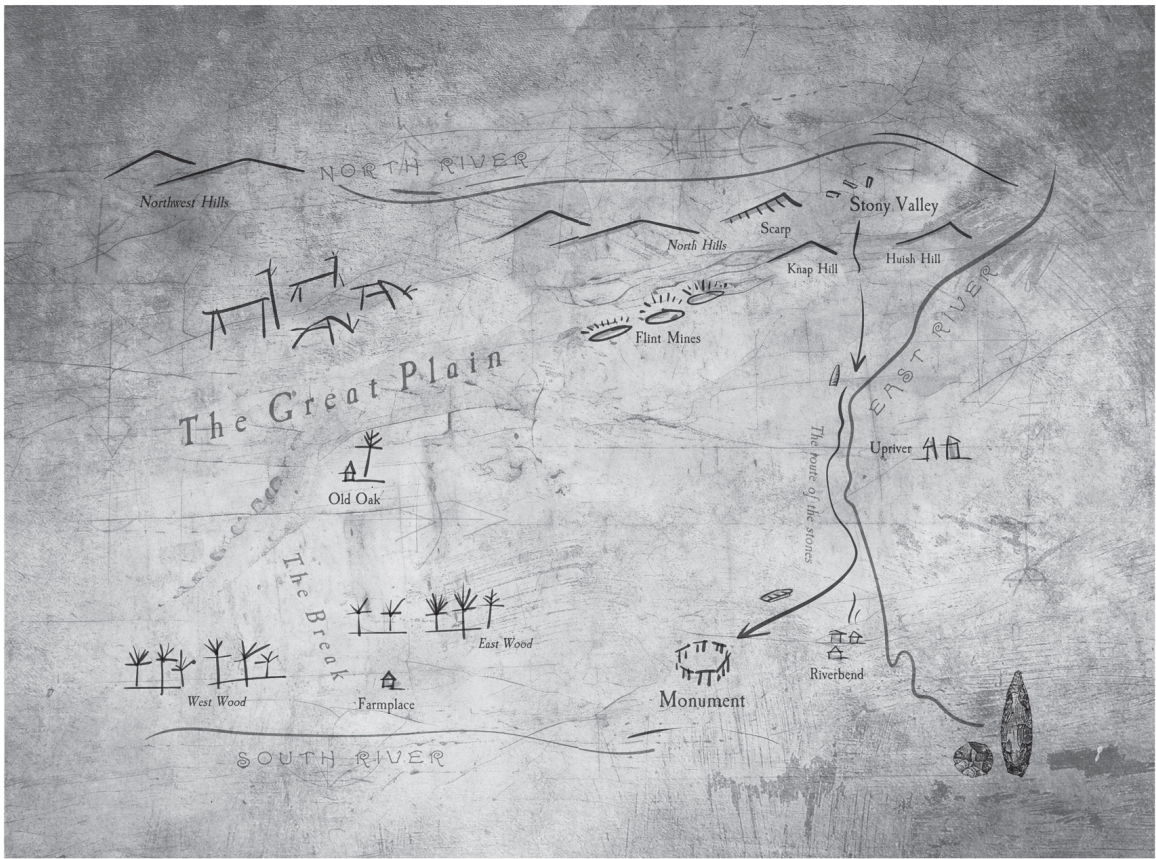
[About the Author](#)

[Also by Ken Follett](#)

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**The story begins around the year 2500
B.C.E.**



Seft trudged across the Great Plain, carrying on his back a wickerwork basket containing flints to be traded. He was with his father and two older brothers. He hated all three of them.

The plain stretched as far as he could see on all sides. The summer-green grass was dotted with yellow buttercups and red clover that merged, in the distance, into a haze of orange and green. Great herds of cattle and sheep, many more than he could count, grazed contentedly. There was no path, but they knew the way, and they could make the journey with time to spare in a long summer day.

The sun was hot on Seft's head. The plain was mostly flat but there were gentle ups and downs that were not so gentle when you were carrying a heavy load. His father, Cog, maintained the same walking pace regardless of the terrain. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we can rest," he would say—a stupidly obvious statement that irritated Seft.

Flint was the hardest of all stones, and Seft's father had a heart like flint. Grey-haired and grey-faced, he was not big but he was very strong, and when his sons displeased him he punished them with fists like stones.

Everything that had a cutting edge was made of flint, from axes to arrowheads to knives. Everybody needed flints, and they could always be traded for anything else you wanted, food or clothing or livestock. Some people stored them up, knowing they would always be valuable and never deteriorate.

Seft was looking forward to seeing Neen. He had thought about

her every day since the Spring Rite. They had met on his last evening, and had sat talking into the night. She had been so warm and friendly that he felt sure she liked him. As he toiled in the pit during the weeks that followed, he often pictured her face. In his daydream she was always smiling and leaning forward to say something to him, something nice. She looked lovely when she smiled.

When they parted she had kissed him goodbye.

He had not met many girls, working all day in a hole in the ground, but those he had met had never affected him this way.

His brothers had seen him with Neen and had guessed that he had fallen for her. Today as they walked they mocked him with vulgar comments. Olf, who was big and stupid, said: "Are you going to stick your thing in her this time, Seft?" and Cam, who always followed Olf's lead, made thrusting movements with his hips, which made them both laugh, sounding like a pair of crows in a tree. They thought they were witty. They carried on in the same vein for a while, but they soon ran out of jibes. They were not imaginative.

They carried their baskets in their arms, on their shoulders, or on their heads, but Seft had devised a way of strapping his to his back with strips of leather. It was awkward to put on and take off, but once it was fixed it was comfortable. They had made fun of it, and called him a weakling, but he was used to that sort of thing. He was the baby of the family, and the cleverest, and they resented him for being smart. Their father never intervened; he even seemed to enjoy seeing his sons quarrel and fight. When Seft was bullied, Cog told him to toughen up.

As they progressed, Seft began to feel the weight of his basket, despite his contraption. Looking at the others, he thought they were not as weary as he was. That was strange, because he was just as strong as they were. But he found himself dripping with sweat.

It was noon, judging by the sun, when Cog announced a rest, and they stopped under an elm tree and put down their baskets. They drank thirstily from the flasks they carried, stoppered pots in leather slings. The Great Plain was bounded by rivers to the north, east, and south, but across the plain there were few streams or

ponds, many of which dried up in summer, so wise travelers carried their water.

Cog gave out slices of cold pork and they all ate. Then Seft lay on his back and looked up at the leafy branches of the tree, enjoying the stillness.

All too soon Cog announced that they must move on. Seft turned to pick up his basket, and hesitated, staring at it. Flints from underground seams were deep, shiny black, with a soft white crust. When they were hit with a stone, flakes broke off, and that way they could be shaped. The flints in Seft's basket had been part finished by his father, bashed into roughly the right shape to become knives or axe-heads or scrapers or piercers or other tools. In this form they were a little lighter to carry. They were also worth more to an expert flint knapper, who would knock them into their final form.

There seemed to be more of them in Seft's basket than there had been when he set out this morning. Was that his imagination? No, he was sure. He looked at his brothers.

Olf was grinning and Cam was sniggering.

Seft realized what had happened. While they were walking, the others had taken flints from their own baskets and surreptitiously added them to his. He recalled, now, that they had come up behind him to make coarse jokes about his romance. That had distracted him from what they were really up to.

No wonder the morning hike had tired him.

He pointed at them. "You two..." he said angrily.

They fell about laughing. Cog laughed, too: he had clearly been in on the prank.

"Wretched pigs," Seft said bitterly.

Cam said: "It was just a joke!"

"Very funny." Seft turned to his father. "Why didn't you stop them?"

"Don't complain," his father said. "Toughen up."

Olf said: "You have to carry them the rest of the way now, because you fell for the trick."

"Is that what you think?" Seft knelt down and tipped flints out of his basket onto the ground until he again had roughly his original

load.

Olf said: "I'm not picking those up."

Cam said: "Me neither."

Seft lifted his basket, lighter now, and shrugged into it. Then he walked off.

He heard Olf say: "You come back here."

Seft ignored him.

"Right, I'm coming after you."

Seft turned around, walking backward. Olf was marching toward him.

A year ago Seft would have given in and done what Olf said. But since then he had grown bigger and stronger. He was still scared of Olf, but now he would not yield to his fear. He reached back over his shoulder and took a flint out of his basket. "Do you want another stone to carry?" he said.

Olf gave an angry roar and broke into a run.

Seft hurled the flint. He had the powerful arms of a young man who spends all day digging, and he threw hard.

The stone hit Olf's leg above the knee. He howled with pain, limped on another two paces, and fell to the ground.

Seft said: "The next one gets your head, you dumb bullock." He turned to his father and said: "Tough enough for you?"

"No more of this nonsense," Cog said. "Olf and Cam, lift your loads and get moving."

Cam said: "What about the stones Seft has left on the ground?"

"Pick them up, you stupid fool."

Olf staggered to his feet. Clearly there was no serious damage, except to his pride. He and Cam collected the flints and put them in their baskets. Then they followed Seft and Cog. Olf was limping.

Cam caught up with Seft. "You shouldn't have done that," he said.

"It was just a joke," Seft said.

Cam fell back.

Seft walked on. His heart was beating fast: he had been frightened. But he had come out of it all right—for now.

In the days since the Spring Rite, he had made up his mind to leave his family at the first opportunity. But he had not yet figured

out how he would make a living alone. Mining was always a team effort, never a solo job. He had to plan his future. It would be too humiliating to have to go back to the family, dispirited and starving, and beg to be allowed to resume his old role.

All he knew for sure was that he wanted Neen to be part of his plan.



A high earth bank surrounded the Monument. The entrance was a gap in the circle that faced northeast. Some distance away was the cluster of houses belonging to the priestesses. No one went inside the Monument today. The Midsummer Rite would be held tomorrow.

People came to the Monument for the quarterly ceremonies, but the gathering of so many people from near and far was also an opportunity, and they often brought with them things to trade. Some were now setting out their wares. They knew not to go inside the sacred circle. They favored the area near the entrance, and stayed clear of the priestesses' houses.

There was a rumble of chatter and a sense of excitement in the air as Seft and his family drew closer. People were arriving from all directions. One group met every year at a hilltop village four days' walk away to the northeast, then followed a well-worn trail, said to be an ancient road, new marchers joining them as they went from village to village, until they arrived, a long column of people and livestock, at the Monument.

Cog stopped next to a couple called Ev and Fee, who made rope out of honeysuckle vines. The miners emptied their baskets, and Cog started to build a pile of the flints.

Cog was interrupted in his work by another miner, Wun, a small man with yellow eyes. Seft had met him before, several times. He was a gregarious type, everybody's friend, and he loved to chat, especially to other miners. He always knew what was going on. Seft thought he was nosy.

Wun shook hands with Cog, using the informal left-to-right

handshake. Right-to-right was formal, indicating respect more than friendship. The affectionate handshake was right-to-left and left-to-right at the same time.

Cog was as taciturn as ever, but Wun seemed not to notice. "All four of you here, I see," he said. "No one guarding your pit?"

Cog looked suspiciously at him. "Anyone who tries to take it over will get his head broken."

"Good for you," said Wun, pretending to endorse Cog's belligerence. All the while he was taking a good look at the pile of part-finished flints, assessing their quality. "By the way," he said, "there's a trader here with a huge collection of antlers. Marvelous."

The antlers of the red deer, almost as hard as stone and with pointed ends, were among the most important of the miners' tools, being used as picks. Olf said to Cam: "We should see that."

They were all looking at Wun, and no one was taking any notice of Seft. Seeing his opportunity, he quietly slipped away, quickly disappearing into the crowd.

There was a straight path from the Monument to the nearby village of Riverbend. Livestock grazed on either side of the beaten track. Seft did not like cows. When they looked at him he did not know what they were thinking.

Apart from that, he envied the herder folk. All they did was sit around and watch their herds. They did not have to hammer at a flint seam all day, breaking up the hard stone and carrying it up a climbing pole to the surface. Cattle, sheep, and pigs reproduced themselves with little help, and the herders got richer all the time.

When he got to Riverbend he stared at the houses, which all looked the same. Each had a low wall of wattle and daub—thin branches interwoven and daubed with mud—plus a roof of turves laid over rafters. The doorway was two posts with a lintel lashed to them. In summer everyone cooked outside, but in winter there was a permanent fire in the central hearth. Meat was hung under the rafters to be smoked. Right now a wicker gate half the height of the doorway let in fresh air but kept out stray dogs and all the little creatures that crept about at night looking for food. In winter the doorway could be completely closed with a more substantial hurdle

made to fit exactly.

There were a lot of pigs wandering around the village and the surrounding land, searching with their snouts for anything edible.

About half the houses were empty. They were for visitors, who came four times a year. The herder folk took care of their visitors, who brought great wealth by coming to trade.

Rites were held at the autumn equinox, called the Halfway; at midwinter; at the Spring Halfway; and, as now, at midsummer, which was tomorrow. A key function of the priestesses was to keep track of the days of the year, so they could announce that, for example, the Autumn Halfway would be in six days' time.

Seft stopped a herder woman and asked the way to Neen's house. Most people knew her, because her mother was an important person, an elder, and he got directions and soon found the place. It was clean, tidy, and empty. Four people live here, he thought, and they're all away from home! But no doubt they had a lot of work in connection with the Rite.

Impatient, he began to search for Neen. He wandered around the houses, scanning for her smiling round face and her lush dark hair. Many visitors had already moved into the spare houses, he noticed: single people and families with children, a few showing the wide-eyed curiosity of visitors to an unfamiliar place.

He wondered anxiously how Neen would welcome him. It was a quarter of a year since they had spent that night talking together. She had been warm to him then, but she might have cooled off. She was so attractive and likable that there must be plenty of other men interested in her. There's nothing special about me, he thought. And he was a couple of years younger than Neen. She had not seemed to mind that, but he felt that she was awfully refined.

He came to the riverside, which was always busy, people fetching fresh water from upstream and washing themselves and their clothes downstream. He did not see Neen, but he was relieved to come across her sister, whom he had met at the last Spring Rite. She was a confident girl with a lot of curly hair and a determined chin. He thought she was about thirteen. She would be fourteen tomorrow. The people of the Great Plain reckoned age in

midsummers, so everyone would be a year older on Midsummer Day.

What was her name? It came back to him: Joia.

She and two friends seemed to be washing shoes in the river. Their shoes were like everyone else's, flat pieces of hide cut to shape and pierced with holes for drawstrings, which were made of the sinews of cows and were pulled tight to make the shoes fit closely.

He went up to her and said: "Remember me? I'm Seft."

"Of course I remember." She greeted him formally. "May the Sun God smile on you."

"And on you. Why are you washing your shoes?"

She chuckled. "Because we don't want to have smelly feet."

Seft had never thought of that. He never washed his shoes. What if Neen smelled his feet? He was embarrassed already. He resolved to wash his shoes at the earliest opportunity.

Joia's two friends were whispering and giggling, as girls sometimes did, unaccountably. Joia looked at them, sighed with irritation, and said loudly: "I expect you're looking for my sister, Neen."

"Of course."

The two friends had expressions that said: So that's it.

Seft went on: "Your house is empty. Do you know where Neen is?"

"She's helping with the feast. Shall I show you the way?"

That was kind of her, he thought, to offer to leave her friends and help him. "Yes, please."

Carrying her wet shoes, she said a cheery goodbye to her friends. "The feast is prepared by Chuck and Melly and all their kin, sons and daughters and cousins and I don't know what else," she said chattily. "It's a big family, which is a good thing, because it's a big feast. There's an open space in the middle of the village, and that's where they do it."

As they walked side by side it occurred to Seft that Joia might be able to tell him how Neen felt about him. He said: "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

He stopped, and she did the same. He spoke in a lowered voice. "Tell me honestly, does Neen like me, do you think?"

Joia had lovely hazel eyes that now looked at him candidly. "I believe she does, though I couldn't say how much."

That was an unsatisfactory answer. "Well, does she talk about me, ever?"

Joia nodded thoughtfully. "Oh, I think she has mentioned you, more than once."

She was being careful not to give things away, Seft thought with frustration. All the same he pressed on. "I really want to know her better. I think she's... I don't know how to describe her. Adorable."

"You should say these things to her, not me." Joia smiled to soften the reprimand.

He kept trying. "But will she be glad to hear them?"

"I think she'll be glad to see you, but I can't say more than that. She will speak for herself."

Seft was two midsummers older than Joia, but he could not persuade her to confide in him. She was a strong character, he realized. He said helplessly: "I just don't know if Neen feels the way I do."

"Ask her, and you'll find out," Joia said, and Seft heard a touch of impatience in her tone. "What have you got to lose?"

"One more question," he said. "Is there someone else she likes?"

"Well..."

"So there is."

"He likes her, for sure. Whether she likes him, I couldn't say." Joia sniffed the air. "Smell that."

"Roasting meat." His mouth watered.

"Follow your nose and you'll find Neen."

"Thank you for your kind advice."

"Good luck." She turned and headed back.

He walked on. The two sisters were different, he reflected. Joia was brisk and bossy, Neen was wise and kind. Both were attractive, but the one he loved was Neen.

The smell of meat grew stronger and he came to the open space

where several oxen were being roasted on spits. The feast would not be held until tomorrow evening, but he guessed it took a long time to cook something so big. No doubt the smaller beasts, the sheep and pigs, would be roasted tomorrow.

Twenty or so men, women, and children were milling about, tending the fires and turning the spits. After a moment Seft spotted Neen, sitting cross-legged on the ground, head bent, intent on some task.

She looked different from his memory of her, but even lovelier. She was tanned by the summer sun, and her dark hair now had lighter streaks. She frowned over her work, and her frown was impossibly charming.

She was using a flint scraper to clean the inside of a hide, doubtless the skin of one of the beasts now being cooked. Seft recalled that her mother was a leather tanner. The force of her concentration fascinated him and moved him almost to tears.

All the same, he was going to interrupt her.

He crossed the open space, his tension mounting with each step. Why am I worried? he asked himself. I should be happy. And I am happy. But also terrified.

He stopped in front of her, smiling. It took a few moments for her to tear her gaze away from the hide. Then she raised her head and saw him, and over her face there spread a smile so lovely that his heart seemed to stop.

After a moment she said: "It's you."

"Yes," he said happily. "Me."

She put down the scraper and the hide, then stood up. "I'll finish this later," she said. Taking Seft's arm, and kicking a pig out of the way, she said: "Let's go somewhere quieter."

They walked west, away from the river. The ground sloped up, as it usually did near rivers. He wanted to talk to her, but he did not know how to begin. After some thought, he said: "I'm very glad to see you again."

She smiled. "I feel the same."

That was a good start, he thought.

They came to a strange edifice, concentric rings of tree trunks. It

was obviously a holy place. They walked around the circle. "People come here just to be quiet and reflect," Neen said. "Or to talk, like us. And the elders meet here."

"I remember you said your mother was an elder."

"Yes. She's really good with disputes. She gets people calmed down and thinking logically."

"My mother was like that. She could get my father to be reasonable, sometimes."

"You told me she passed away when you were ten midsummers old."

"Yes. She conceived a baby late in life, and she and the baby died."

"You must miss her."

"I can't tell you how much. Before she died, my father had nothing to do with us three boys. Maybe he was scared to pick up a baby, or something. He never touched us, never even talked to us. Then when Mamma died, he suddenly had to look after us. I think he hated taking care of children, and hated us for making him do it."

Neen said quietly: "That's awful."

"He still never touches us—except to punish us."

"He hits you?"

"Yes. And my brothers."

"Didn't your mother have any kinfolk who could have protected you?"

That was a big part of the problem, Seft knew. A woman's parents, siblings, and cousins were supposed to take care of her children if she died. But his mother had had no living relatives. "No," he said, "my mother had no kin."

"Why don't you just leave your father?"

"I will, one day, soon. But I have to figure out how I can make a living alone. It takes a long time to dig a pit, and I'd starve to death before I came up with any flint to trade."

"Why don't you just collect flints from streams and fields?"

"That's a different kind of flint. Those nodules have hidden flaws that cause them to break often, either while they're being shaped or when they're in use as tools. We mine the floorstone, which doesn't