THE LONG FALL

The Long Fall

PENELOPE WILCOCK

LION FICTION

Published by Lion Fiction
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com/fiction

ISBN 978 1 78264 143 8
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 144 5

This edition 2015

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, January 2015, LH26

Contents

The Community of St. Alcuin's Abbey 00
Chapter One: The Last of the Summer 00
Chapter Two: The Wake of the Storm 00
Chapter Three: Picking up the Pieces 00
Chapter Four: Out of Silence 00
Chapter Five: A Promise 00
Chapter Six: Sore 00
Chapter Seven: The Course Run 00
Chapter Eight: Winter 00
Glossary of Terms 00
Monastic Day 00
Liturgical Calendar 00

For
Mark and Gill Barrett

The Community of St. Alcuin's Abbey

Monks

Brother John	*infirmarian*
Brother Michael	*assistant infirmarian*
Brother Edward	*helps in infirmary*
Father Chad	*prior*
Father Columba	*abbot – known as Father Peregrine*
Brother Gilbert	*precentor*
Brother Thomas	*abbot's esquire/farm*
Father Francis	*illuminator, to seminary*
Brother Walafrid	*herbalist/winemaker*
Brother Giles	*assistant herbalist*
Father Theodore	*novice master*
Brother Cormac	*kitchen*
Brother Thaddeus	*assistant in the abbot's house, works also in the pottery*
Brother Ambrose	*cellarer*
Brother Clement	*scriptorium and library*
Brother Fidelis	*works in the garden*
Brother Peter	*cares for the horses, built wheelchair*
Brother Mark	*beekeeper*
Brother Stephen	*responsibility for the farm*
Brother Martin	*porter*
Brother Paulinus	*gardener*
Brother Dominic	*guestmaster*
Brother Prudentius	*farm*

Brother Basil	*bell ringer*
Brother Richard	*fraterer*
Brother Damian	*away at university*
Brother Josephus	*abbot's assistantt.*
Brother James	*book binding, becomes university student*
Father Bernard	*cellarer in training*
Brother Germanus	*farm*
Father Gerard	*almoner*

Novices and postulants

The members of the novitiate are not mentioned in this book, but these are some of the brothers, who are in the novitiate in Book 4:

Brother Benedict	*working in various locations*
Brother Boniface	*helping in the scriptorium*
Brother Cassian	*working in the school*
Brother Cedd	*helps in the scriptorium and robing roo*m
Brother Conradus	*responsibilities in the woodyard*
Brother Felix	*helps Father Gilbert*
Brother Placidus	*works in various locations*
Brother Robert	*assists in the pottery*

Sick or aged brothers living in the infirmary

Brother Denis
Father Aelred
Father Anselm
Father Paul
Father Gerald
Brother Cyprian

Deceased community brethren mentioned in *The Hawk and the Dove*

Father Gregory	*previous abbot of the community*
Brother Andrew	*cook*
Father Lucanus	

Assistants to the community

Martin Jonson	*lay worker in infirmary*

'The worst of partialities is to withhold oneself, the worst ignorance is not to act, the worst lie is to steal away.'

Charles Péguy

Chapter One

The Last of the Summer

July 22nd. The blackberries are in flower. Pink. They are pink, and I thought they were white; but these new, tender, thrusting shoots are burdened with clusters of tight, grey-green buds, and here and there a flower of sharp pink.

The raspberries grow thick and luscious this year, all that rain. It's raining now: fat drops of rain spattering into the languid warmth of the evening, hissing in the flames of the bonfire. The honeysuckle sprawls over the fence, its sweet, heavy scent mingling with the woodsmoke. The fragrance of it in the warm, damp stillness of the evening is decadent, feminine, overpowering.

The sage is in flower, its purple-blue petals shining brighter as afternoon drifts into dusk and the sun fades. The borage flowers too are bright stars of blue, and the dropping clusters of pink and blue comfrey flowers hang motionless from the thick, hairy stems. The elderflower is nearly finished now, the umbels of dense blossom give way to a plentiful load of berries. The roses are still a mad profusion of beauty, a good promise there too of fruit. Rose-hip syrup, elderberry cordial—there'll be plenty for the winter.

In the physic garden, the feverfew is a mass of yellow and white, and the calendula growing up radiant among it. Flowers, everywhere flowers. What a summer it's been. The hay was half-ruined in the rain, just a bit left standing to come in. The grain harvests look good now, though, and the beans are looking

healthy, which is just as well. There was nothing to them last year, and what we dried was scarce enough to eke through the winter months. Ah, but the honey will be good this year! The flowers ardent with life on their stems, nothing faded or limp. There should be enough nectar in there to put a smile on any bee's face.

Evening coming down now: a rumble of thunder threatening in the distance. The sound of the cows lowing as they come down from the pasture to the byre. Brother Stephen was late with milking again, then. He needed more help, really, this time of year. Further away, the voices of the sheep on the hills. What must it be like to live where there are no sheep; not to hear the sound of the ewes calling their lambs, and the lonely cry of the curlew overhead, and the sweet, rising song of the lark?

Brother Tom forked the last wayward straggles of leaves over the smoking fire. The Office bell was ringing for Compline. The wind changed, and the smoke from Tom's bonfire engulfed him suddenly. He turned away choking, his eyes stinging with it.

'Serves you right, standing here dreaming when you should be on your way to chapel,' he told himself. He left the pitchfork leaning against the fence, and walked down through the garden to the abbey buildings. The bell had stopped ringing, but he was not hurrying even now. It just wasn't that kind of evening.

At thirty-three years old, Brother Tom had been a fully professed brother of St Alcuin's Abbey on the edge of the Yorkshire moors for eleven years now, serving God under the Rule of St Benedict, learning the rhythm of spirituality which sees prayer as work and work as prayer. He had had his early struggles, like most men, but he was contented in the life now. His time was for the most part occupied with his duties in the abbot's house, but he was a big, brawny man, raised on a farm, and there were not many days he let pass without doing some work out of doors in the garden, or on the farm, or up on the hill pastures at lambing time.

He looked with satisfaction at the patch he had weeded, as he strolled down towards the cloister. He paused to tie up a white rose that was straggling across the path, the slender stem bowing under the weight of its blossom. He rummaged in his pocket for the end of twine that was in there somewhere, cut it in half with the knife that every brother kept in his belt for a hundred and one uses, and tied the rose back neatly. He bent to breathe in its perfume before he left it and disappeared into the passageway that led through to the cloister. There was a little door in the wall of the passage, through which he entered the vestry and sacristy of the abbey church.

Tom stood for a moment, accustoming his eyes to the change as he left behind the dim fragrance of the summer dusk, and stepped into the chapel with its smells of stone and beeswax and incense, the echo of its silences widening out about him, an immense, deep cave of breathing dark.

In the choir, the tranquil chant of the psalm was ringing. Tom listened carefully: '… *frumenti, vini, et olei sui multiplicati sunt. In pace in idipsum dormiam …*'

'Faith, they're on the last verse already,' he muttered to himself. 'I'd better move.'

The reading from the Rule at the morning's Chapter had been concerned with punctuality at the Office, and the abbot's homily on the chapter they had heard had dwelt at some length on punctuality as a golden rule of courtesy, and courtesy as a jewel in the crown of Christian charity.

Brother Tom had not listened to the homily with the closest attention, being familiar through long experience with this particular bee in his abbot's bonnet. Anything that Father Peregrine took to be a necessity for courtesy was insisted upon punctiliously. Brother Tom, having held the obedience of abbot's esquire for eleven years now, had heard a great deal in the course of time on the subject of courtesy and punctuality.

He moved briskly across the Lady Chapel into the choir, and slid into his place with an appropriately submissive air just as they were singing the final phrase of the Gloria from the first psalm. He could not, then, technically be said to be late, but it was only by the skin of his teeth. He could feel his abbot's eyes on him, and risked a glance at him. Father Peregrine was shaking his head at him in disapproval, but the amusement and affection in his face were plain enough. Brother Tom knew better than to presume on it though, and bent his head meekly, joining in the chant of the psalm: *'Non accedet ad te malum: et flagelum non approprinquabit tabemaculo tuo. Quoniam angelis suis mandavit de te: ut custodiant te in omnibus viis tuis …'* ('Upon you no evil shall fall: no plague approach where you dwell. For you has he commanded his angels: to keep you in all your ways …')

Brother Tom had often wondered what his abbot made of the promises of that psalm, and all the other promises like it that were scattered throughout the Scriptures. How did Father Peregrine feel when he sang those words, Brother Tom wondered; Father Peregrine whose left leg had been lamed and his hands crippled by an attack of thugs. He had borne the disablement thirteen years now, limping about the place on a crutch, struggling with the handicap of his awkward, deformed hands; yet he sang those promises in the psalm with equanimity.

Brother Tom wondered if the abbot's soul ever raged against God, *'Where was your protection when I needed you? Where were your angels for me?'* Probably; but he kept such things, like most things, to himself. Brother Tom sighed. He loved his abbot, but being his personal attendant was no easy job. He was not an easy man, with the storm and fire of his moods, the quick flare of his temper, and his high standards of spirituality. Still, Tom knew no one like him for compassion and tenderness when a man was broken by grief, or weariness, or defeated by weakness and despair. It was that particular quality of his gentleness with men in trouble that

betrayed the nightmare of his own suffering. But—did his soul ever rage against God? Tom wondered. Maybe not. Father Peregrine's favourite text from the whole of Scripture was Pilate's brief sentence '*Ecce homo*,' 'Behold the man'; spoken as Pilate brought out the flogged and battered figure of Jesus, decorated with Roman spittle, crowned with thorns. Behold the man, Emmanuel, God with us. Tom had heard Father Peregrine recall the minds of the brethren again and again to this living icon of the love of God. Maybe he regarded his sufferings as some kind of offering to this wounded deity.

'He is the God of the broken heart,' the abbot would tell his monks, 'the God of the bruised spirit, and the shattered body. Those are his shrines where the power of his presence dwells, not the relics of the dead or the altars built by human hands.'

Tom looked across the chapel at him now. He looked weary. He always looked weary. Last night when Brother Tom had got out of bed at the ringing of the bell for the Night Office, he had looked for his abbot, whose chamber he shared, and found his bed not slept in. As he passed to the cloister through the great room which was Father Peregrine's centre of operations, he found him rising stiffly from his table spread with plans and accounts relating to the abbey farm. It was the same in the morning when the bell was ringing for Prime and the morrow Mass.

Brother Tom had scolded his superior as he washed him and shaved him before they went into Chapter.

'You're fussy enough about everyone else keeping the rules, you should keep them yourself. Any other brother in this house that drove himself as you do, and wasn't in his bed where he ought to be at night, and you'd be on his back like a ton of bricks. What's so special about you?'

'I'm the abbot of this community; that's what's so special about me. If I don't get all this business about the farm buildings right, we shall be into debt again, and have I not worked these

fifteen years to get this community back into solvency and keep us that way?'

Brother Tom washed the last traces of soap from his abbot's face.

'You look a wreck. Your eyes are that shadowed you look as though you've been in a fight. You're losing weight. You look horrible. You're sixty years old this September, you can't go burning the candle at both ends at your time of life. You'll make yourself ill—you *will,* don't look at me like that. You're a monk. You're supposed to be humble and put your trust in God and go to bed at night and eat up your dinner like a good lad. If I were your superior instead of you mine, I'd bawl you out for your flouting of the Rule.'

'My superior? Since when have you wanted to be my superior to bawl me out? Hark at you! Brother Thomas, I swear living with you is like being married without any of the fun. Peace, man, for pity's sake. Come now, will you carry some of these documents to Chapter for me? I'll be here with them today with Brother Ambrose and everyone who knows the details of it, but I must give some indication to the community of what we're about.'

After the Chapter meeting, where the bare bones of the situation had been laid before the brethren, the abbot met with Brother Ambrose his cellarer, Father Chad his prior, Brother Stephen and old Brother Prudentius from the farm, and Father Bernard who was learning the difficult and complex job of the cellarer with a view to taking it over from Brother Ambrose who, though as shrewd and competent as ever, was none the less getting very old. One of the abbey's tenant farmers, who helped with the farm management in lieu of part of his rent, was also with them; and Brother Tom had the job of fetching and carrying plans, deeds and letters as required.

The plans under discussion concerned some of the farm buildings, which had for some while been in need of repair. The

need was becoming urgent, but the coffers of the abbey had been heavily bled by Papal taxes and the King's war taxes in the past year. In addition to this, the hay harvest had all but failed throughout the region in the rains of the early summer, which meant buying and transporting in hay from elsewhere for the winter months.

Brother Thomas had listened to all this with some interest. The business talk of his superiors usually failed to engage his attention at all, but the subject of farming was one near to his heart, and he understood it well.

'… in addition to this, we lost fifty-eight ewes from the blowfly after we moved them down from the hill pasture to the orchard. That wasn't our fault. We had to move them because of Sir Geoffrey d'Ebassier's wretched hunting dogs harassing the sheep. The Cistercians at Mount Hope will sell us some ewes in lamb this autumn, when we have the money from the wool we sell of this summer's shearing. Theirs is all good stock, but we can expect no favours. We shall have to pay through the nose for them.

'Brother Stephen is adamant that we must replace the beasts' field shelters here … and here. The repairs to the byre will have to wait. We must pray for a good winter, that's all.

'Another call on our finances is the urgent repair to the masonry of the main drain from the reredorter. That can't wait. The morale of any community is only as good as its latrines.

'There is also the matter of the repair of the tower at the church of St Mary the Virgin. The tower, Brother. It was damaged in the gales during the spring, if you recall. So was the roof at the east end of the church. Father Chad said Easter Mass for them with drips of rain dancing on his pate, which entertained the people vastly no doubt, but we have responsibility for repairs there, and also we are liable for the priest's house.

'Further to that, Bishop Eric and his retinue will be here for six weeks in February; that means fires, and winter feed for his

horses, and a mountain of provisions at the leanest time of the year.

'Also, we are bound to send at least two of the junior monks to university this year. We won't get away with pleading poverty another year. Brother James, probably, and maybe Brother Damien. I'm not sure. I have friends at Ely who will put them up in the abbey's hostel at Cambridge, which will cut down the expense a little.

'We could look at increasing the rents again, but that'll go down like a dish of toenails as usual. Other than that, I don't know. I'm hoping you have some suggestions for me. But if they include building a bam with three threshing floors like the one at Barlbridge Manor and a new dovecote, which is what I've heard rumoured, you can forget it. Brother Stephen?'

Brother Stephen cleared his throat. 'Well … with all due respect, Father, I do feel the dovecote is a matter of some urgency. We left it last year, and the year before that. The pigeons do us very well for meat all through. As you just pointed out, the bishop will be here, and we shall have to feed him. If half the birds have died of cold, it'll only mean slaughtering more sheep or cockerels. If we rebuild it, and build larger, we can accommodate more birds, which we really ought to do.'

Father Peregrine sighed. You're too tired, thought Tom. You can't think straight, can you? He watched the tension around his abbot's eyes, the persistent twitching of the left eye. Your head's aching, and you feel sick with it.

'Oh, very well. Does it truly have to be rebuilt? Can we not repair it?'

Brother Prudentius shook his head. 'The roof has been in holes through several winters. Some of the timbers have rot, and the nesting boxes the same.'

'Yes, but if we repair it, the rot will stop, won't it?'

Brother Prudentius said nothing, meekly lowering his eyes.

'Won't it?' snapped the abbot.

'Yes, Father,' Brother Stephen responded resignedly.

'Thank you. The roof, I grant you, must be repaired. We can do that.

'The field shelters, then. Brother Stephen?'

'The one out on the hills … here … is tumbling down. It needs rebuilding, but it is all stone. Brother Thomas and I can do that after the harvest, if you will spare him for me. This one also is in a bad state. The great ash tree fell on it in the spring gale. Again, those timbers and the stonework are not beyond us, but I shall need Brother Thomas. We can make new piers for it I should think, wouldn't you, Brother?'

Brother Tom nodded. 'I've done it before.'

Brother Stephen smiled encouragingly at his abbot, who did not respond, but sat scowling in thought at the plans of the abbey estate in front of him. Brother Stephen exchanged a quick glance with the farm manager, and then embarked cautiously on the proposal about which he had the least optimism: 'If you'll look at the outlying buildings to the west there, Father—there near the boundary. I doubt if you have been out there yourself for some years.' It was said respectfully, but it was a barbed shaft designed to get Brother Stephen his own way, and it made its mark. The tension in Peregrine's face increased, and the tightness about his mouth and jaw was a warning with which Brother Tom was all too familiar.

'Yes?' There was not much that the abbot could not accomplish, disabled though he was, but it was true he had not ventured out to this steep and rough terrain since he had been lame. Brother Stephen, Tom thought, was unlikely to win himself much sympathy by rubbing his abbot's nose in his disabilities.

'The shelter shed there is large, and in need of extensive repair. Not to put too fine a point on it, it is falling down. The bam has worm in some of the aisle joists. The lift is rotted through, and

the pigs and poultry from the neighbouring land can come and go as they please. Also, if we took it down now, while some of the timbers will still serve us, and built a larger bam with two, maybe three, threshing floors and a porch with a granary over, we could cut down on transport of feedstuffs and straw—'

'Brother Stephen.' The abbot spoke quietly. 'Over my dead body will you tear down a perfectly good bam to pursue some grandiose scheme of your own. May I remind you we are sworn to holy poverty. It is not the most convenient building, and I am prepared to consider enlarging it if that is within our means when all the repairs are done; but that is all. The joists and the lift to keep out the animals, we will replace.'

Brother Stephen said nothing. The farm manager opened his mouth to speak. Peregrine looked at him, silently. The man closed his mouth, and nodded.

The atmosphere in the room as the men rose to attend midday Office, was not entirely happy.

Things did not improve after the midday meal as they got down to close inspection of financial possibilities.

'My Lord, we could always' (Peregrine raised one eyebrow in sardonic response to Brother Ambrose's obsequious approach) 'sell corrodies, as we used to—'

Save your breath, thought Tom, in the split second before the abbot thundered, '*No!* The years I laboured to reclaim this abbey from its debts! I am not now going to encumber it with unwanted inhabitants mingling with the brothers to their spiritual detriment and weighing round our necks forever, just to raise ready money now!'

Brother Ambrose raised his hands. 'So be it, so be it. We are back to pulling our belts in and raising the rents, then.'

'Yes. Yes we are, until we have achieved the stability we need to afford the improvements we would like—always providing those are sufficiently modest to be in keeping with our vows of poverty.'

They had finished before Vespers, Father Peregrine insisting on restricting all expenditure to the most frugal necessary repairs. The men were disappointed, but they trusted and respected him, and accepted his judgement with the best grace they could muster.

Brother Tom was left alone with the abbot as the others went their way. Peregrine sat staring at the accounts and plans spread before him.

Tom seated himself opposite him, in the chair Brother Prudentius had vacated.

'Have you ever noticed, Father,' he said, 'what an ill view of life a man has when he is dog-tired, and his head is throbbing, and his headache has made him feel sick so that he's hardly eaten for two days? Have you ever noticed how short with his brothers a man like that can be, speaking sharply to them and not having the kindness, as he normally might, to hear out their points of view?'

'Brother Thomas, are you lecturing me?'

'Would I dare to? I simply wanted to remind you that a man without sleep, food and leisure is indistinguishable from a man without charity, patience or a sense of humour.'

'Well, thank you very much. Now, I have some work to do with these accounts. No doubt you also have some work to be getting on with.'

'Perhaps I should have said, "… without charity, patience, a sense of humour, or any other kind of sense, including common sense".'

'Brother Thomas, that is impertinent. You are presuming too much upon my goodwill, and you are testing my patience sorely. That is enough. Go and weed your garden, or whatever it is you want to do.'

Brother Tom gave up, and left him to it.

Now, as Peregrine sat in chapel at Compline, his face was drawn in hard lines of weariness, his eyes and mouth tight in tension and pain.

After Compline, the brethren retired to bed in silence. Tom gave his abbot ten minutes to return to his house, then rose from his knees in the chapel and followed him in. He found him seated once again at his table, the accounts spread out. Tom sat down opposite him. Peregrine raised his head. He lifted his eyebrows in enquiry. He did not speak. They were in silence now.

'Go to bed,' said Brother Tom.

Peregrine frowned. 'Brother Thomas, we are in silence.'

'Please; go to bed.'

The abbot hesitated. 'Brother, to tell you the truth, I don't feel very well. I must get this straight in my head before I go to bed, in case I have a fever or something in the morning. I promise you, after I have done these last few things, I will spend a day or two searching out my lost common sense, not to mention my sense of humour and all the rest. I can hardly keep my mind to it as it is. You go to your bed. I shall be finished before Matins. I will get some sleep before morning.'

The brothers had to be abed early if they were to be up for the Night Office at midnight, and it was still no later than ten o'clock when Brother Tom unfastened his sandals and his belt, took off his habit and climbed into bed in his drawers and undershirt. The Rule laid down that the brethren must sleep clothed saving the knives in their belts which might wound them as they slept, but Tom had no intention of going to bed in a habit on a hot summer night. Outside, dusk was only just deepening into night, though it was dark enough in the chamber of the abbot's house, with its tiny slits of windows.

Tom kicked off his blanket. It was sultry weather, and oppressive even in the cool of the monastery buildings with their thick walls of stone. In the distance, he could hear a low rumbling of thunder. He could not get comfortable in his bed, and lay shifting about restlessly for a while. 'Wish it would rain,' he said to himself; 'I can hardly breathe.' The few, fat, heavy drops that

had fallen earlier had come to nothing, and the night waited in sullen stillness for the storm. Tom lay on his back, his knees drawn up and his hands clasped behind his head, staring into the dark. 'I'll never get to sleep on a night like this,' he thought.

He was woken by a tremendous rending crash of thunder. Lightning flashed blue through the narrow window, and the air was full of the sweet freshness of rain. Tom lay listening to the torrential wetness of it on the sloping roof of the abbot's chamber, built on as a single-storey after-thought projecting from the rest of the building. He rolled onto his side, raising himself on one elbow, listening. The deluge of rain and the rolling of thunder were loud enough to obscure the sound of anyone's breathing, but he was sure he was alone. Another flash of lightning illuminated the room; a split second, but long enough for him to see his abbot's bed, empty and unruffled. Tom frowned. 'Whatever's he doing?' he muttered.

He slid out of bed and pulled on his habit, fastened his belt, then went through into the main room of the abbot's house. The great oak table was a litter of plans and accounts still, but Father Peregrine had gone.

The door into the cloister was closed, but someone had opened wide the little door at the back of the room, beside where the scribe's desk stood under the window.

Brother Tom crossed the room and looked out through the low, narrow doorway into the streaming dark. Peregrine was standing on the flagged path, leaning on his wooden crutch, his face held up to the pouring rain. The thunder growled and crashed around him, the flashes of lightning intermittently illuminating the path awash with rain and the wet leaves of the birch tree tossing in the storm.

'Come inside, you crazy fool!' Tom called. 'What the devil are you doing?'

Peregrine turned round at the sound of Tom's voice. In

the momentary illumination of the lightning, Tom saw his face radiant with exultation, laughing in the wildness of the storm.

'Man, truly I wonder if you're quite sound in the head,' Brother Tom grumbled at him as he came and stood in the doorway, the fringe of hair around the tonsure plastered to his skin, the whole of him drenched, from head to foot. Tom stared at him incredulously. 'Father, I … oh, you witless … witless … Here, let me go fetch a towel: don't you dare cross that threshold till I'm back.'

He went out through the main door of the room, that led into the cloister, and down to the lavatorium beside the kitchen entrance, where the stack of towels lay neatly folded for the morning. He grabbed two from the top and hurried back to the abbot's house.

Peregrine stood in the doorway still, his back turned to the house, looking out at the deluging night.

'Come and dry yourself now; you'll be catching your death of cold. Look at you, just look at you! No, wait; let me come to you—you're wringing wet, and it's me, not you, will have to mop this floor in the morning.

'Oh, Father, the state of you! You're wet to the skin! I'll have to find you something dry to wear. Have you a habit in your chest in the chamber?'

Peregrine was rubbing his head with one towel while Tom scrubbed him down with the other, having peeled his dripping clothes from him and flung them in a soggy bundle onto the doorstep. Peregrine looked at Tom, his eyes dancing, his face still full of the wildness and jubilation of the storm. 'I don't know,' he said. 'You're my esquire. You're supposed to know about that sort of thing.' He grinned at Tom happily. 'It was the joy of the rain,' he said apologetically, 'the passion and grandeur of the storm. I didn't mean to put you to any trouble.'

'It'll be no trouble to me at all. Father. You'll have to go to

Chapel naked if I can't find anything, that's all.'

Tom lit a candle and went back into the chamber. He opened the chest against the wall, setting the candle down beside him so he could see well enough to rummage for some clothes.

'Your old habit is there,' he said to Peregrine as he returned. 'It'll do till morning. Patched and stained it is, this one, but never mind, it's dark, no one will see. There's an undershirt here too, about fit for a scarecrow, but it'll serve for now. Drawers you'll have to live without until the morning. Come and sit in this chair then, so you can put that crutch down.'

He helped his abbot into the dry clothes, and dried his belt and sandals with the towel.

'I've no idea what the time is. Should we go to Chapel or back to bed? Oh, there's the bell now. There, you look reasonable, which is more than you are. Let me fasten that door before we go. Did you get your work done?'

'I did. It's sorted in my mind now. I can see how to do what's needful within a year without incurring debts. I'll go through it with Brother Ambrose and Father Chad in the morning. But hush now, we're breaking silence shamelessly. No more talk.

'Except—Brother Thomas, thank you. For everything, I mean.'

During the Office, in the long chanting of the Gospel, Brother Tom watched the abbot's eyelids drooping irresistibly; the little shake of his head as he fought valiantly to stay awake. He lasted through to the end of Matins, but by the time the bell was ringing again for Lauds he leaned sideways in his stall, his head lolling, fast asleep.

Tom left his place in the choir and crossed over to Father Peregrine. He shook his shoulder gently. Peregrine sighed and stirred, opened his eyes and looked up sleepily at Tom. 'Mm?' His eyes were drowsing again.

'Father—' Tom bent over him, his hand on his shoulder.

Peregrine would be deeply embarrassed to be caught dozing once Lauds had begun. 'Father—'

The abbot's head rolled and he murmured something, then his body sagged completely, sliding down in his stall. Tom squatted down beside him, taking hold of his arms: 'Father … Mother of God, he's convulsing… .'

He looked back over his shoulder, and saw with relief Brother John coming into Chapel. The infirmary brothers were not always there for the Night Office. Whether they were free to come depended on whom they had in their care.

'Brother John!' Tom spoke urgently, but not loud. Even so, his voice overrode the whisper of robes and the shuffling of sandals as the brethren made their way back into the choir for the second Office of the night. All round the choir, cowled heads lifted, and Brother John strode to his side in the stillness of a watching, listening silence.

'He's in some kind of a fit—I don't know—he's convulsing… .'

'Let me squeeze past you. Yes, hold on to him. I want to try and get a look at his face. Look, if I lift under his arms, will you take his legs? Lay him on his side, not on his back. Can you manage?'

The calmness of Brother John's voice eased Tom's fear. They lifted him down from his stall, and laid him on the ground.

'No vomit in his mouth. His eyes are all over the place, look. Face very grey. Hmm. He doesn't look too good, Tom. Can I come where you are? Let me have a look at his body. Oh … yes. Can you see how all this right side is awry? And his face, look—twisted the same. I've seen seizures like this before. He might well come through … but … there, the convulsion has stopped now. Breathing very, very slow. Faith, he's a horrible colour, isn't he—even by candlelight.

'We'll carry him to the infirmary. Bring the bier round from the parish side. We'll take him on that. Send someone ahead of

us to the infirmary to give Brother Michael word to expect us—someone sensible; Brother Francis or someone. And Tom! Tell Father Chad to start the Office, will you? This silent audience is giving me the creeps.'

The chapel was full of heaviness as the tense, despondent silence of the gathered community roused itself into the ancient duty of worship. They had already seen death that year: Father Matthew, in the spring, and old Father Lucanus six weeks after him, in Whitsuntide. The brothers' voices rose and fell with the chant, but their thoughts were with the unconscious form of their abbot as the bier trundled out of the south door of the choir to the infirmary, under the sombre speculation of their gaze.

In the infirmary, night-lights were burning in the still, warm dark. Brother Michael had made ready for them, prepared a bed already in a room where no other patients slept. Like Brother John, he moved in unruffled efficiency; he was used to men, fearful and ill, needing his reassuring calm as much as they needed bones splinting or fever physicking, or muscles rubbing. It was part of the nursing care the infirmary offered, and Brother Michael, aware of Tom's agitation, made available to him the soothing peace of his own competence.

Tom hovered anxiously, watching Brother John's face while he and Brother Michael put the abbot into a clean bed and stripped him of his habit. Peregrine's body was as limp and unwieldy as a corpse now, offering neither cooperation nor resistance. His eyes were open, but rolling independently, and his breathing rasped slow and stertorous. Brother John's face, observant and purposeful, gave nothing away as he went about his work.

'That's his old tunic,' Tom explained. He was aware of his voice gabbling nervously, but not able to slow it down. 'He went out in the rain tonight and got himself wet through. That's an old undershirt too. I couldn't find him any drawers, it was the middle

of the night. I was expecting to find him some presentable clothes in the morning. He—'

Brother John looked up at Tom. 'It's all right. He won't be needing to wear drawers here for a while. He won't need his habit either, and we've a whole cupboard full of undershirts. Don't worry yourself, Brother. I suggest you go and get a bit of rest. If there's any change, I'll send you word. He may be quite a time like this, and then it could go either way. Be prepared for that.'

'I told him. I told him he was working too hard and he'd be ill if he didn't slow down.'

Brother John shook his head. 'It probably would have happened anyway, Tom. He's not getting any younger. These things can sometimes be hastened or delayed—but not by very much. We'll do our best for him, don't fret.'

Brother Tom nodded, and stood there a moment longer. 'I'll go then,' he said. 'There's nothing else I can do. Let me know.'

As he went back out into the night rain, he was gripped by a sense of deep loss. There had grown between himself and Father Peregrine over the years a bond of trust and love. Prepare yourself, Brother John had warned. It would not be all that easy to prepare himself to lose the dry wit and warm compassion, the honesty and courage and faith, of the man he had come to know so well.

Brother Tom did not return to his bed. He went back to the chapel. There was nothing he could do, but he could pray, and sleep would be an impossibility. It was the sight of Peregrine's eyes that haunted him: rolling in the grey, sagging face. Sleep would be exiled by that memory. He pushed open the door, and walked slowly back into the choir.

There he found the rest of the community, who in silent unanimity had remained in prayer. They stayed there, united in anxious intercession, until the morning.

Chapter Two

The Wake of the Storm

'It would make more sense for you to be on the farm than working in a job like this, wouldn't it?' asked Father Chad.

'Yes. It would. I'd like to be on the farm just now.' Brother Tom stood before the great oak table in the abbot's house. Father Chad had it considerably tidier than Father Peregrine ever had. He had been Father Peregrine's prior for so many years now, and the community was now so stable both economically and pastorally, that he had been able to step smoothly into the role of abbot, filling his superior's place in time of sickness. Brother Tom looked down at the tidy table, and at Father Chad supplanting Peregrine in the abbot's chair. The resentment he felt was, he knew, the danger of particular friendships. As part of his vow of chastity, keeping his heart guarded against human affection, he ought now to contemplate the prospect of another man filling Father Peregrine's place with equanimity. He did not. There was no point trying to deceive himself.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I think I'd rather be on the farm. There are two strips of hay still standing because of the rain in June. They need to get it down and stacked as quickly as possible, and they need someone to thatch the ricks besides Brother Stephen. We want to begin work on the field shelters in the least sheltered places before harvest, too. Once the harvest is over and the fall is on us, the weather will be more uncertain, and we shall need to