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*“Penelope Wilcock has created a wonderful cast of characters to fill the marvellously accurate fourteenth-century monastery in her medieval series. For the lover of medieval mysteries this is a series not to be missed.”*

**Mel Starr, author, *The Unquiet Bones***

# Remember Me

PENELOPE WILCOCK



LION FICTION

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Published by Lion Fiction  
an imprint of  
**Lion Hudson plc**  
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road  
Oxford OX2 8DR, England  
[www.lionhudson.com/fiction](http://www.lionhudson.com/fiction)

ISBN 978 1 78264 152 0  
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 153 7

This edition 2015

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

Printed and bound in the UK, June 2015, LH26

FOR  
ELVIRA McINTOSH

*who never gave up searching for me  
but went on until she found me  
who lifted me up and encouraged me  
who supported me as a writer—which is what I am  
who understands Christ's call to community  
and also to simplicity  
and who looks for ways  
to bring the Gospel to ordinary people  
exactly as she finds them  
and where they are.  
God bless you, Elvira, and thank you.*



# Remember Me

*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*  
*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*  
Taizé chant of the words of the Thief on the Cross

*Do this to remember me.*

Words of Jesus at the institution of the Eucharist

*If you find it in your heart to care for somebody else,  
you will have succeeded.*

Maya Angelou

*Some stories are true that never happened.*

Elie Wiesel

*Dying is a wild night and a new road.*

Emily Dickinson

*Accept me, Lord, as thou hast promised,  
and I shall truly live.*

Benedictine Suscipe

*Can you not find it within you to look with eyes  
of compassion?*

Tony Collins

*There is no fear in love.*

1 John 4:18





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# The Community of St Alcuin's Abbey

(Not all members are mentioned in *Remember Me.*)

## Fully professed monks

Abbot John Hazell	<i>once the abbey's infirmarian</i>
Father Chad	<i>prior</i>
Brother Ambrose	<i>cellarer</i>
Fr. Wm. de Bulmer	<i>cellarer's assistant (formerly an Augustinian prior)</i>
Father Theodore	<i>novice master</i>
Father Gilbert	<i>precentor</i>
Brother Clement	<i>overseer of the scriptorium</i>
Father Dominic	<i>guest master</i>
Brother Thomas	<i>abbot's esquire, also involved with the farm and building repairs</i>
Father Francis	<i>scribe</i>
Father Bernard	<i>sacristan</i>
Brother Martin	<i>porter</i>
Brother Thaddeus	<i>potter</i>
Brother Michael	<i>infirmarian</i>
Brother Damien	<i>helps in the infirmary</i>
Brother Cormac	<i>kitchener</i>
Brother Richard	<i>fraterer</i>
Brother Stephen	<i>oversees the abbey farm</i>
Brother Peter	<i>ostler</i>

Brother Josephus	<i>acted as esquire for Father Chad between abbots; now working in the abbey school</i>
Brother Germanus	<i>has worked on the farm, occupied in the wood yard and gardens</i>
Brother Mark	<i>too old for taxing occupation, but keeps the bees</i>
Brother Paulinus	<i>works in the kitchen garden and orchards</i>
Brother Prudentius	<i>now old, helps on the farm and in the kitchen garden and orchards</i>
Brother Fidelis	<i>now old, oversees the flower gardens</i>
Father James	<i>makes and mends robes, occasionally works in the scriptorium</i>
Brother Walafrid	<i>herbalist, oversees the brew house</i>
Brother Giles	<i>assists Brother Walafrid and works in the laundry</i>
Brother Basil	<i>old, assists the sacristan—ringing the bell for the office hours, etc.</i>

**Fully professed monks now confined to the infirmary through frailty of old age**

Father Gerald	<i>once sacristan</i>
Brother Denis	<i>scribe</i>
Father Paul	<i>once precentor</i>
Brother Edward	<i>onetime infirmarian, now living in the infirmary but active enough to help there and occasionally attend Chapter and the daytime hours of worship</i>

**Novices**

Brother Benedict	<i>assists in the infirmary</i>
Brother Boniface	<i>helps in the scriptorium</i>
Brother Cassian	<i>works in the school</i>
Brother Cedd	<i>helps in the scriptorium and when required in the robing room</i>
Brother Conradus	<i>assists in the kitchen</i>

Brother Felix	<i>helps Father Gilbert</i>
Brother Placidus	<i>helps on the farm</i>
Brother Robert	<i>assists in the pottery</i>

**Members of the community mentioned in earlier stories and now deceased**

Abbot Gregory of the Resurrection	
Abbot Columba du Fayel (also known as Father Peregrine)	
Father Matthew	<i>novice master</i>
Brother Cyprian	<i>porter</i>
Father Aelred	<i>schoolmaster</i>
Father Lucanus	<i>novice master before Father Matthew</i>
Father Anselm	<i>once robe maker</i>
Brother Andrew	<i>kitchener</i>

## CHAPTER ONE

# July

Like a subtle wraith of mist in the still-dark of the night in late July he stole: silent and fleet, not hesitating. He came from the northwest corner of the church, where a small door led out into the abbey court from the side of the narthex. He did not cross the court, but passed stealthily along the walk between the yew hedge and the perimeter wall. Swift and noiseless he slipped along the close. It was a clear night but the dark of the moon, and only the stars gave light at this hour of the morning. At the end of Lauds, as the brothers shuffled back up the night stairs to resume their sleep, he had abstracted himself so unobtrusively that no one had seen. He had dodged back into the nave and stood in the deep shadows of the arcade in the side aisle on the north side of the church, hardly breathing. When all was still, he opened the small door with utmost caution; sliding the bolts back slowly and steadily without a sound, drawing the door closed and lifting and dropping the latch with barely a click, he left, and he was outside in the freshness of the night. Such faint light as the stars gave out found his silver hair, but that was the only glimmer of his presence as he slid from the abbey court along the close.

Peartree Cottage stood in the middle of the row of houses. The wicket gate stood ajar, and he pushed it open without a sound. As he stepped into the garden, the herbs gave up their fragrance underfoot. He felt a slug fall into his sandal. He stooped to flick out the slug and to scratch up a handful of earth that he flung at

the upstairs window. No response. He tried again. This time the casement was opened with irritable vigour from the inside, and Madeleine's voice said sharply, "Who is it?"

Peering down suspiciously into the garden she might not have seen him, but he moved very slightly and most quietly spoke her name.

"Whatever do *you* want?" she whispered then, surprised.

"Will you let me in?" She heard the soft-spoken words. And as she came in the dark down the narrow ladder stairway, she realized the implications of this visit. Naturally cautious, she asked herself, *Are you sure you welcome this?* Just in going down the stairs, in opening the door, she realized her heart was saying, *Yes*.

As quietly as she could, she drew back the bolts and turned the key, lifted the latch, and opened the door to him.

"Whatever has possessed you? What on earth do you think you're doing?" she whispered fiercely as he came into the room. "Shall I light the candle?"

"Nay, nay! There are no curtains, you might as well light a beacon," he said softly. "Can you not see?"

He himself had good night vision; it was an honest question.

"I wouldn't need to see!" she whispered back. "Who else would risk us both being thrown out by coming here at this time of the night? Are you certain no one saw you?"

"It's only a fool who is ever certain no one saw him. I surely hope not though, or we are done for, as you say."

In silence they stood then, not three feet between them in the warm darkness of the cottage. Embers tidied together on the hearth still glowed from the small fire Madeleine had lit to cook her supper. They gave out hardly any light at all, but between the embers and the stars, the shapes of things in the room and the man who stood before her could be clearly enough discerned.

"Well?" she said then. "What should I think? Why are you here?"

He stood silently. She waited for his reply. She knew well enough but did not dare to presume what she hoped for.

“Do you...” His voice sounded unsure then; she heard the vulnerability in it. “Do you want me?”

Madeleine hesitated one last moment. There was still time to go back on this. She heard the intake of his breath in anxious uncertainty.

So she said in quick reassurance, “Of course I want you. With the whole of me. But is this honest? Isn’t it stolen? Aren’t we deceiving my brother?”

But he waited for no further discussion; she was in his embrace then, the ardent hold of yearning that she and he had waited for, it felt like for so long. He did not kiss her, simply held her to him, his body pressed trembling against hers.

She closed her eyes and took in the feel of him: the heat of his hunger for her, the beating of his heart and his quickened breath—all of him, bone and muscle and skin, the soul of him that lit every part, the pulse of desire and destiny. She loved the touch of him, the smell of him. She knew by heart every mannerism, every trick of movement and expression, every inflection of his voice. In any crowd she would have turned at his footstep, knowing whom she heard.

“I had to come to you,” he whispered, his face against her hair. “I couldn’t think, I couldn’t sleep; I haven’t been able to concentrate on anything. I know I can’t have you, I do know. But I need to have the memory of just one time together for a refuge, for a viaticum—something real. I have been so desperate for you... to touch you... to hold you close to me... to feel your heartbeat and bury my face in your hair. Oh, my love, my love... I have *ached* to hold you.”

She felt his hand lift to her head, caressing, and by the starlight she saw in his face such tenderness, such a flowing of love toward her as she had never imagined life might offer. He kissed her then, delicate kisses as light as a lacewing landing on a leaf: kissed her throat, her jaw, her cheekbones, her brow, kissed her eyelids closed, and then she felt his lips brush the curve of her cheek to find her

mouth. He too closed his eyes as she parted her lips to the slow, beautiful, sensual rhapsody of his lover's kiss.

She felt the momentous tide of it overflow through all of her like the wave swell of the sea; then before she could bear to let him go, he drew back from his kiss, but still held her close. She wished she could see him properly, read the look in his eyes dark in the darkness.

"This is not what I thought," he whispered, "not what I expected."

He felt her body tense at his words and said hastily, "No! No, I didn't mean what you think. You are everything I want, all I long for! It's just that I had imagined this would lay things to rest—allow us to acknowledge something that is between us, and let it have its moment. I thought it might make it easier to relinquish it and give it back to God. But it doesn't feel like that now.

"Now that I am holding you I want never to have to let you go. I want us to share a bed and make love together, but I want us to share a home and make a life together, too. I want time to discover all the things I don't know about you yet. I want to watch you washing at the sink in the morning as the sun comes streaming in through the open door. I want to watch you brushing your hair. I want to find you kneading dough for our loaf at the table when I come in with the firewood for our hearth. I want you to teach me about herbs and how to grow them."

"Brother Walafrid could teach you about that," she murmured.

"Yes, I know," he whispered, "but I don't feel the same about Brother Walafrid as I do about you."

She had rested her head against the hollow beneath his collarbone as she listened to these words. She heard the smile in his voice, and he bent his head to kiss the top of hers.

"When I entered monastic life," he said, in the quietest undertone, "it was for pragmatic reasons—I had no money, was the thing, and that's what keeps me there still: no money. I've heard



men talk about vocation often enough, but I couldn't feel my way to it—didn't really know what they meant. I have never had a sense of vocation until now.

“Now, all of me wants to be with all of you forever. Now I know what vocation is. But I am fifty years old, and I have no trade and no family. There is nothing I can offer you, and there is nowhere for us to go—even supposing you want me, too.

“You asked me if this was honest. It's probably the most honest thing I've ever done in my life. I know it's beyond reach. If I come back here again, someone will see, it will be discovered somehow—these things always are—but I thought I could risk just this one time. And I can offer nothing more. You and I both, we depend on the charity of the community to house us; there are no other choices. Like the poor everywhere, we have no rights and no options. But one night, for pity's sake, just *one night!* And it's not even a night, only a miserly hour between the night office and Prime. But after this, you must not watch for me nor wait for me, for I shall not be able to come to you—not ever again—but, oh my darling, remember me, remember this hour we had. If you get a chance of happiness with someone else, take it with both hands; I shall not be jealous. And deceiving John? Up to a point. I won't tell him, and I won't let him see. But I wouldn't lie to him, and I won't pursue this. It's just that I couldn't have lived the rest of my life starving to hold you for *one time* close to me. Maybe it is stolen. Yes—it is. But a starving man will snatch a crust of bread because it is life to him. And this is life to me.”

He closed his eyes, drinking in the touch of her under his hands, the smell of herbs about her, the texture of her hair and her skin against his mouth, the softness of her body yielded against his. And then his mouth quested again for hers, and again he kissed her in deep, rapt communion. Like music, like a sunset, that kiss seemed to go on forever but had its own beginning and its end. And as he kissed her, William felt something change deep within him. He felt, from his belly, from his loins, from his

heart, from his mouth, from his soul, the reality of what he was streaming forth unchecked, soul to soul. When their kiss found its conclusion, he realized that he had given all of himself, and it could never be taken back. Too late to choose a different path, to give less of himself or set any kind of boundary, he realized that this course he had chosen would break his heart. It was not realistic to suppose something like this could be contained in one night. When he slipped back through the half-light before the dawn, he would be leaving meaning and fulfillment and all his dreams behind.

He laid his cheek against her cheek, and their bodies melded together as if nothing could ever separate them; he tried to burn this moment so deep into his memory that no matter how much time passed it would never be erased again.

“When I first met you,” said Madeleine then, moving her head to look at him as the first barely discernible beginnings of dawn lifted the dark, “I thought what a hard man you were—face like granite, eyes like flint I thought, no hope of give or take of any kind. But right in the middle of you there is this wellspring of such tenderness, isn’t there? Something so delicate and gentle.”

She saw the movement of his half smile, and the grey twilight delineated the beloved contours of his face.

“It used not to be the case,” he said. “And even now, I think there might be only one soul in all the world who could find that upwelling and see it for what it is.”

He kissed her mouth, so full and soft, and groaned with longing: “Oh God, I cannot let you go! I cannot give this back! Oh my sweet, my dearest—remember me. I shall live on this memory for the rest of my days. And if I ever find a way to you, if I can puzzle out any means for us to be together, I will come back for you. But do not wait, for that may never be. Truly, if you do find a chance of happiness with someone else, in heaven’s name take it and that with my blessing. But even then, dearest, I beseech you—please—remember me.”

And he enfolded her close, close against him, so that she felt the agonizing tenderness of his longing and his love. Then as the grey in the east lifted another shade toward light, knowing he must be back in the church before daybreak in time to mingle with the main ingress of brothers coming to prayers, he drew back from her, pressed his lips to her brow in one last kiss, and let himself silently out of the cottage with no further farewell.

“No...” she murmured, left standing by herself in the middle of the empty room, which never had felt lonely until now, “No... oh Jesu, mercy! Of your mercy, find us a way! Oh God have mercy! I cannot bear to lose this, too!”

*Do not wait for me...* he had said. Madeleine wondered whatever chance he thought there would likely be, for a woman of forty-three living on the charity of a monastery, to pick and choose a spouse. She knew that if this one chance with him was not given, she would never know the comfort and companionship of marriage at all. And she knew that even if by some miracle another suitor came her way, that could never be anything better than second best. She wanted *this* man: this complex, sardonic, guarded man with his complete disregard of rules, and his cool detachment, and the flame of absolute passionate tenderness that hid at the core of him.

The snatched hour had vanished more quickly than he could believe, and William left Madeleine’s cottage later than he’d meant to. It had been his intention to return well before dawn and be in his stall in choir before any trace of sunrise coloured the sky. His brothers coming down for the daybreak office would think—if they thought anything at all—that he had been unable to sleep and had come down early to win the first blessing and spend some time in private meditation. But already, as he latched the garden gate behind him, the stars were fading and the grey lifting every moment, tinged faintly with rose above the eastern rim of the hills. William felt the familiar contraction of anxiety in the hard muscles of his belly and his chest and his face. He could not afford to enter

the chapel late, not for this morning office that offered no possibility of a man having been detained on the legitimate occupation of his daily duties.

Keeping close to the yew hedges, still blocks of darkness in the receding shadows of night, he skimmed noiselessly around the open spaces to the small door in the wall of the church that he'd left on the latch for his return. In a moment of panic he thought it had been locked, but steadying his hands to try the catch again, the second time it lifted properly; and he was inside, aware already of the distant but increasing rumbling reverberation of the community descending the night stairs in the clumsiness of waking recently and incompletely. He felt his heart thumping painfully as he disciplined himself to latching the door, sliding the bolts home, with the slowness of absolute silence.

Tension gripped him like a vice as he forced himself to walk soft and slow along the arcade of the side aisle, cursing himself for a fool as he heard the brothers already entering the choir from the night stairs that led down into the south transept. He felt his mouth go dry and his chest constrict as he slipped like a ghost across the north transept, trusting to the shadows to keep him hidden at this early hour. He had to hurry now. Going foxfoot along the narrow ambulatory that curved behind the high altar past the sacristy and little devotional shrines, he sped toward the south transept. He flattened himself against the cool stone of the wall, hardly breathing as the last of the brothers came down into chapel. Then he made himself wait for a slow count of ten, following the last man in from the general direction of the night stairs with all the flustered appearance of someone who has rolled late out of bed, just as the abbot gave the knock and the community rose for the cardinal office of Lauds.

The brothers were sleepy. Theodore, who sat opposite him in choir and occupied the cell next to him in the dorter upstairs, had a sharp eye for how things were with a man but was unlikely to take any notice of anyone fractionally late. William thanked God from

the depth of his soul that he seemed to have gotten away with it. With difficulty he gave his attention to the psalm.

He was grateful, too, for the shelter of the Grand Silence extending beyond chapel to the refectory as the brothers broke their fast, with bread and ale in these warmer months—they would have porridge to start the day once the frosts began.

As he stood in the frater with the others, keeping custody of his eyes, eating bread left over from yesterday with Brother Walafrid's ale—always more successful than his wines—William felt something in his soul clutch hungrily at the sense of peace and security in this house. They had allowed him in. They had accepted him. It was true that Abbot John's wise stricture against allowing too close an intimacy to develop between himself and William had hurt. William knew well that no personal attachments were permitted to him and that the abbot's friendship must be for all of them in general and no one of them in particular, but he also knew the affection that had grown between himself and John was real. Severing it might be inevitable, but it was still painful. Even so, the dull ache of that faded into the background compared with the red-hot pain of renouncing Madeleine's company. He could not deny that John had been entirely right in insisting William visit her no more. As he chewed the bread and swallowed the ale, he reflected on what he had begun in going to her cottage and declaring his love. Until then, relinquishing her friendship had been the necessary sacrifice of a faithful monk. Its pain had felt intolerable, but the bitter taste had been sweetened by the upholding of his integrity. He had given up John; he had given up Madeleine—he had stayed faithful to this house and to the monastic way. The perpetual light of Christ's presence in the oratory of his heart's innermost chamber had burned on. It was different now. He had broken his vows. He had no claim on Madeleine nor hope of seeing her; he must make no claim on his superior but back off to the distance every brother must keep. All that was hard enough, but now he had thrown away his integrity as well.

He wiped his mouth on the napkin, his face morose. The security and peace of acceptance in this safe place had been besmirched and trampled on by his own deceit and by—he did not know what to call it—the thing that had taken place between him and Madeleine. He thought he should call it sin, but something in him, deeper than that framework of belief could touch, cried out against such a judgment. As he held her in his arms, as he kissed her, as he revisited the brief time they had shared and touched it again in memory while he sat in the frater now, chewing dry bread, all he could discern was the simplest, purest love. All he could feel was that he had been made to love her, born to love her. To call it temptation and sin fitted in with everything he'd always been taught, but it made no instinctive, intuitional sense at all.

In the Morrow Mass and at Chapter, he moved through the same grateful insulating cloaking of silence, glad of its protection.

After Terce, he went out into the abbey court and to the checker. Brother Ambrose came in after him, in a cheerful mood.

“Overslept, did you?” he inquired, his tone playful. “The day rises still so early it’s hard to be up with the lark!”

William lifted down the receipt book from its place on the shelf. He could see that he had set himself up for a whole tangle of lies and covert deception.

“It certainly is,” he replied. “Did you pay the man for laying the hedge at St Mary’s graveyard, or hasn’t he been for his money yet?”

He worked steadily then through the morning. It took him some time to discern the intended meaning of Brother Stephen’s spelling on the chit from the farm, but eventually he managed to grasp that a saw had cost them tenpence and a hatchet ninepence ha’penny, and the smith would be calling to collect threepence ha’penny for mending something he couldn’t read that seemed to have to do with a plow.

Conradus had asked for sieves to be mended and requested any cord they could spare for stringing herrings. It had cost him

threepence to have some tankards bound and a guinea for several pots to be mended and bound. William frowned at the account. He hoped the novice hadn't been too zealous in his standards of improvement. He wondered how many pans it had been; Conradus hadn't made that clear.

He looked at the carpenter's and cooper's bills and the amount they had paid out to Jenny Tiler for the work her husband had done on the dovecote roof and wondered about the skills of the young men Theodore had in the novitiate. He thought they could do with a few more like Brother Thomas and rather fewer sensitive musical scholars in their next intake of postulants. It seemed ridiculous to him that they were now nearer forty than thirty monks living here in community and still paying someone else to tan the hide of the horse that died of colic after it broke into the feed store.

He accepted that clearing the ditches and scything the grass in the land they owned beyond the village was an inevitable expense. They couldn't be sending monks all that way over there to do the work, nor to make charcoal in the coppices. But surely they had enough pairs of hands for the work in their own farm and garden. And rabbits? "Upon my soul, this is extravagance!" he exclaimed aloud. "We have *paid* someone for rabbits? I must have words with our kitcheners about this; that won't do. It won't do at all. Have we no traps of our own?"

"It's Brother Cormac," explained Brother Ambrose. "He won't set traps."

"Won't set traps but he will buy rabbits, eh? Not anymore! I'll see him about it this afternoon."

He was as good as his word. After the midday meal he waited until the noise had subsided of the servers and kitcheners clearing tables and eating their own food and washing the pots from the meal. Then he went through to the kitchen where Brother Cormac and Brother Conradus were putting away the last few utensils to leave all the work surfaces uncluttered and clean.

"Brother Cormac," he said, "have you a moment?"