

Elenor. He watched as Thomas, a huge block of a man now, got slowly off his horse and bowed over Elenor's hand. He watched Elenor shrink.

At dinner Elenor threw bones to the dogs and looked at Thomas from the corner of her eye. Thomas ate and endured, and looked often to his men, as if for reassurance. Father Gregory kept a thin line of conversation going. Eight years stood impenetrable between them.

After wine was poured all around, a shout went up from Thomas' men.

"To the fair Lady Elenor!"

Elenor, white-faced and startled, quickly glanced at Thomas, meeting his eye for the first time.

"They've been toasting you all the way home," he said.

"Me? Why me?" She bit her tongue. She realized why. To them she was an ideal, like a lady on a tapestry. Thomas was the picture of a lord. She must be the picture of a lady. She returned the toast shakily, but swallowing the wine was beyond her. When no one was looking, she spit it back into the cup.

Father Gregory's confessional was teeming. Those who had finished confessing their sins came out from behind the brown curtain reluc-

‡ 24 ‡

tantly, blinking in the light, stumbling past people waiting for the good Father's absolution. Thomas strode by the church several times, glancing in quickly, pretending some other errand. When at last he saw that the booth was empty, he slipped in.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned...."

Afterward, he went to the stables. He saddled up Daisy and rode out into the hills, away from the castle and village, exploring half-remembered paths. He murmured to his horse as he rode. He had bought Daisy in France on his way home and had been getting her used to his voice and his mind.

"I think, if we go up here, we will find a creek.... Right! Here we are, finest water in England.... Would you like to drink, then? Let's go closer. Watch out, mud's soft here...." As the horse drank, Thomas watched the sun playing on the water.

He had been dreading this homecoming. Self-loathing had kept him from planning what he should do to make it a success. He did not especially want to marry the Brat, a skinny, contentious child playacting at being a lady. He did not especially want to rule Thornham, much less the greater lands of Ramsay. From all reports, Sir Robert was doing that job better than he would ever do it, seeing that land within his jurisdiction was well apportioned

‡ 25 ‡