

Long before dawn, Father Gregory woke with an idea so startling he sat bolt upright. When Carla stumbled downstairs to light the breakfast fires, she was amazed to find the priest had brought in wood for her, done the milking for Billy, and was hoeing up a new vegetable plot with the energy of a man possessed.

"A good morning to you, Father Greg!" she shouted. "Have you come upon the fountain of youth?"

Father Gregory kept on working, humming to himself, trying to slow his mind enough to think about the idea that had come to him.

After three days of riding the estate behind Sir Robert, three days in which he felt increasingly unwanted and alone, Thomas came back to Ramsay to receive his penance. Father Gregory asked Elenor to join them in the chapel. They knelt, a few feet apart, awkwardly waiting to see what he could possibly have to say to them together. Each wished for a moment to speak to the priest alone, but Father Gregory was unusually formal and impassive. His words echoed off the stone walls like the binding vows of a sacrament, and for one horrible moment, Elenor thought he had called them there to be done with it, to marry them on the spot.

"Would you, Thomas, and you, Elenor, be willing to do penance for this whole community?"

Each said yes, first Thomas, then Elenor, a puzzled frown on her face.

"Would you be willing to put aside considerations of your own happiness if it would restore the people of all Ramsay to spiritual health?"

Again they both nodded, Elenor's lips framing a silent question.

Father Gregory took a deep breath, like a man about to dive off a high cliff. Elenor and Thomas both leaned forward on their knees, ready to catch him, and then straightened, embarrassed.

"The penance I impose on you, for the sake of the entire community, is to bear a record of our sins and contrition to the shrine of Saint James in Spain, to lay it upon the altar of the cathedral in Santiago, and to pray there for us all.

"You will travel as chaste companions.

"Your marriage may not be consummated until the pilgrimage has been completed."

For a moment they continued to kneel before the old man in the small stone chapel, Elenor so astounded she felt her heart stop. Then they were both on their feet: Elenor, clared, incredulous, hugging the priest; Thomas still wearing the solemn expression he had assumed to receive his penance, because he wasn't sure how he felt.