

Chapter One

In the late February lamplight over the tea table, Amy Fraser's face was a little patch of stark white under the softly gleaming auburn of her hair, which was braided very plainly about her face. The rest of her was a dark blur of mourning clothes. Durable still, the heavy blacks had been bought for the death of her parents nearly two years before and were now too tight and just a little too short, for the eighteen-year-old had grown significantly since then. The skirts showed off her ankles beneath three layers of petticoat, like a younger girl's, and she wore them with considerable embarrassment. She was tired, and her wide, sensitive mouth drooped a little as she stared blankly at the cup and saucer in her own hand. She had not been to the funeral that morning, but had been forced to stay home with Mrs. Ashfort while all the ladies of the Ashforts' acquaintance expressed their condolences.

James, Amy's brother-in-law, had gone to the funeral, and now he sat to her left, his grim face and bloodshot eyes testifying to more than one night of weeping since his beloved Flora had closed her eyes for the last time. Flora had begged Amy to take care of him, and Amy considered him now, wondering how she had dared to agree to that foolish request. Take care of James! Flora might as well have set her to take care of the Prime Minister or some all-powerful djinn from the Arabian Nights for all the opportunities James gave to be comforted. Yet Amy, on her knees, had said yes, yes of course, as she wiped a spot of blood from her precious sister's cheek.

"That is how you take it, Amy, with milk?" Mrs. Ashfort's voice cut unpleasantly across Amy's unhappy reverie and made the girl startle. Her harsh Manchester accent still sounded strange to Amy's ears after the years she'd spent at school in the south, losing her own Scottish brogue. When Amy didn't immediately respond, Mrs. Ashfort nodded impatiently at the cup. "You take your tea with milk? Is something wrong with it?"

Amy blinked. "No, Mrs. Ashfort." She took a deep swallow of the hot, strong India tea and managed a meager smile. "Thank you."

"Eat a biscuit," Mrs. Ashfort ordered sternly. "You look like to faint." She was not a very tall woman, nor was she fat, yet somehow she gave the impression of being substantial, and Amy had once seen her intervene to carry a heavy coalscuttle up the stairs for a struggling parlor maid.

Her dark, imposing brows made her look as severe and intimidating as her son. Yet her features might have been called handsome, and there was sometimes a glint of wry humor in her black eyes, though not often.

“Let her be, Mother,” James said in a low voice, though he did not lift his gaze from the rug. “How is she supposed to look today?”

Mrs. Ashfort pressed her lips together and tossed her head, and to propitiate her, very mechanically, Amy ate a hard biscuit, coughing a little at the crumbs. She certainly had no desire to make Mrs. Ashfort any *more* displeased with her. Everything Amy did, said, or was, displeased Elizabeth Ashfort, who considered her late daughter-in-law's sister too frivolous, too Scottish, too mannered, or most bluntly, “a bit daft.” Before Flora's death, when Amy's presence in the house had only extended to school holidays, Amy had been a bit amused by the dry old woman. Now, with Flora gone, it was James's house, and his mother was the lady of the house. She could make Amy's life unpleasant.

When he had drunk a cup of tea, James stood up, buttoning his black frock coat closed. “I am going back to the mill. Amy, come down to my office in the mill yard at quarter past seven.” He frowned briefly at the windows, where the gloom of evening was already beginning to gather. “Have a servant walk with you,” he added.

“Yes, James,” Amy said in a little voice, sounding unusually meek. She supposed, at last, it was time to talk about her future. Amy's parents were gone, and now her sister was gone as well. Though she had family on her mother's side, they were stern Hebridean Scots; her father had been the last of his line. And though Amy had a small inheritance from a great-aunt, her father had died at the low ebb of Fraser fortunes, and left his daughters with debts that James Ashfort had stepped in to pay. There was a little money, but not much. Probably not enough to secure any kind of advantageous match. Amy was well, if somewhat erratically, educated; she supposed she might become a governess.

She passed the hours before her appointment with James under Mrs. Ashfort's eye, working on her embroidery while that woman knitted yards of impossibly delicate lace with an implacable face. Amy was exhausted and wished she might rest, but did not wish to rouse Mrs. Ashfort's disdain by confessing her fatigue, and so at seven when she pulled on her shawl and followed the servant just down the little alley and through the mill yard, her steps were slow and her face very wan. James was not in his office, but on the floor of the mill supervising the shift

end, his clerk informed her, and so Amy sat down to wait.

It was nearly a quarter of an hour before James came in, and when he did, he started and seemed not to remember having ordered her to be there. Amy's eyes flashed with annoyance as she perceived that she was forgotten, and she rose. "If you are not ready for me, I will return to the house," she said with a marked coldness.

"Stay," James said plainly, and even in her irritation, she could see that he was as tired as she. He sat down at his desk, rubbing his forehead with his palm while Amy settled back into her chair. "Your mother's brother has written," he said finally and straightened up, reaching into a pigeonhole of the desk to find the letter. "He says that in return for the income from your annuity, he is willing to shelter you in his family's home on Grimsay, in the outer isles."

"Oh," Amy said flatly, since James seemed to expect her to say something, and Amy could not think of anything at all to say about that—at least nothing that would not sound ungrateful and childish. But even the name of the island, Grimsay, seemed to suggest plain oatmeal, harsh winds, and long hours of dour sermons. That was, she'd understood generally from her mother, what the place had been like, and it was why Mrs. Fraser had been only too happy to live in Edinburgh with her husband.

On seeing that Amy wasn't going to say anything more, James continued, "He's a sharp fellow, and I suspect seventy pounds a year is a greater inducement to him than family duty. I can't see, either, what kind of marriage prospects you'd have out there. But his home is open to you, nonetheless."

Amy nodded mutely. Was that the end of it then? To be sent up to the wind-scoured islands her mother had fled for a better life on the mainland? The end of all her father's plans and hopes, all her education? But there was nothing she could do about it, and so Amy kept silent.

"My home," James said finally, "is also open to you. I cannot pretend my mother has any desire for a companion, but your presence may do her good, if you can learn to be docile. You must not expect to lead an aimless, idle life under my roof--"

At the injustice of that, Amy's eyes, ordinarily of a soft blue-gray, went icy with fury, and an involuntary noise escaped her. How could he speak so? Amy had spent the last three weeks serving Flora every moment, sleeping at the foot of her sister's bed, and trying to soothe every pain until the last, too great to be borne, ended all the pain forever. "If I've deserved that reproach, then I ought to go to Grimsay, indeed!" she flared.

James pressed his lips together, but did not reprove her temper. Perhaps he, too, remembered what Amy had been doing. Instead he said, in a somewhat gentler tone, “You have been a good—a good girl, Amy, but you are an emotional creature, and you require discipline. You cannot be permitted to let grief overmaster you. Tell me how you passed your days at school?”

“At school? In study, I suppose.” Indeed, Amy supposed it more than knew it, for while her school had been very strict and exacting, their curriculum had been narrow and not particularly inspiring of careful study.

“I mean how did you pass your hours? At what hour did you arise?” James continued, more or less patient.

“Oh...” Amy sighed. “We arose at six and made ourselves and our bedroom ready for morning inspection, breakfasted at six-thirty, said devotions...” She ran through a minute schedule in a sort of weary drone, for the girls at her school had been regimented down to quarter hours for much of the day, and were whisked from piano practice to language lessons to calisthenics with little or no leisure. “And at six-thirty we had to answer for our infractions to Miss Cabot, then dinner at seven, and silent study until the bell rang for bed at nine o'clock.”

“I see.” James seemed a little taken aback at the volume of information his inquiry had produced. “Did you like it there?”

Amy looked up at him, not having expected such a question, but his dark eyes were honestly interested, and so she said, slowly, “I hated every moment there.”

James nodded. “They weren't particularly delighted by your presence, either, if the letters Miss Cabot sent to us over the last two years were anything to judge by.”

She gave a little, muted sigh at that and carefully refrained from rolling her eyes. “I only wanted to go out and breathe the air.”

“You were given ample opportunity for breathing during the day, were you not?”

Frustrated, Amy shook her head vehemently. “There was always somebody around, watching, and frocks to keep clean. I couldn't smell the rain on the old blackthorn or feel the light on my skin.”

“Celtic raptures are all very well, Amy,” James snapped, exasperated, “but you're not to dismantle barred windows to go for walks in the middle of the night!” He drew in a deep breath, and seemed to deliberately pause to regain his composure, then he said, “In any case, the school

seems to have at least accustomed you to keeping regular hours. I will make up a similar plan for you to keep while you are in my house, when I have spoken to Mother about what kind of work she has for you to do. You may take time in making your decision between my home and your uncle's, but as long as you are here you are my responsibility and my ward, and you will comport yourself obediently or be corrected. Is that understood?"

James's voice was, in its way, as markedly Yorkshire as his mother's, though somewhat more cultured. When he was stern, it seemed to declare itself more forcefully, even his syllables sharp and irritated in that brusque Northern manner. It was hateful, Amy thought, and she had to take time to force herself to speak. "Yes, James," she answered. Amy had not always gotten along well with her brother-in-law, and had bitterly resented the scoldings he gave her when letters from school made Flora cry with vexation that her little sister had been so naughty. Flora—if perfect deportment now could take away one iota of pain that Flora had suffered, Amy would have gladly submitted to the strictest of regimens from then until the end of time. At the thought, her throat grew thick with tears. Flora would never again cry for anything, and neither, Amy vowed fiercely, swallowing, would she. She would bear the Ashforts' constraint as well as she could, for now. She felt crushed and battered by sorrow and severity, and rather morbidly self-pitying.

"Very well," James said, and he rose, taking Amy's hands to help her do the same. He retained possession of one of her hands and tucked it into his arm, keeping the girl close at his side as he led her out into the mill yard and back to the house. It was freezing cold, and now there was sleet coming down. Amy turned her face into James's arm almost involuntarily, trying to keep the icy stuff out of her eyes and mouth. James led her carefully into the house and, when they were home, placed her directly in front of the fire to dry.

Over dinner, Mrs. Ashfort made James talk business and update her on the mill's workings, but when that was done, conversation fell off and there was silence as Amy poked at a thick slice of mutton joint on her plate, trying to eat as little of it as possible until Mrs. Ashfort finally noticed and scolded her into finishing it. After the meal was done, they all retired to the drawing room, and Amy was allowed to sit with her beloved King Charles spaniel, Montrose, at her feet, accepting from the dog all the affection she would never again receive, she thought morosely, from another person, now that Flora was gone.

But not for very long. Then James said decisively, "Amy, you ought to have an early

night.”

It was a testament to how tired she was that Amy did not protest at that. Besides, she needed him in an agreeable mood. She rose without complaint and came to stand in front of him. Quietly, she said, “Brother...if I do go to Grimsay, may I leave Montrose here, with you? I... I am only not sure they would treat him well, and I know he would serve you faithfully.”

Mrs. Ashfort gave a dry, unpleasant laugh. “Not sure they'll feed the animal? Better wonder if they'll feed you, child. Scots,” she snorted.

It was too much to be borne. Amy's head was flung back, and she turned on the woman with flashing eyes, fists tightly clenched at her sides. “Montrose was the last puppy my father ever bred, Mrs. Ashfort, and Papa fed him gravy beef by hand. Scots are not all the same.”

“Oh, your father was always the fine gentleman, with very liberal notions indeed,” Mrs. Ashfort returned sarcastically. “For all the good that did him. If my James hadn't—”

“Mother! That will do.” Though James's voice was not very loud, it was stern enough to cut his mother off immediately. He fixed Amy with his dark eyes. “You may keep the dog here if you wish,” he allowed curtly.

“Thank you,” Amy murmured, and paused for a moment in confusion. Before Flora's death, when visiting the family, it had been her habit to curtsy to Mrs. Ashfort, and then kiss Flora and James good night. But without Flora, they both seemed strangers. Yet, James had spoken for her, and on impulse, Amy dipped her head to press a kiss to her brother-in-law's cheek. He allowed the kiss, inclining his head slightly at her approach, but gave no other notice to the caress. Amy, feeling a blushing uncertainty, quickly moved to curtsy to the gimlet-eyed Mrs. Ashfort, and then hurried upstairs, grateful for the end of the day and the brief respite of sleep.

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“That girl is laced too tightly,” Elizabeth Ashfort said decisively, as soon as the girl in question was safely upstairs.

“Mother,” James sighed. “Please be kind to her.”

“I've been nothing but kind to her,” Elizabeth returned sharply. “She's not kind to herself with such fine lady fasting and crushing her ribs like that. Do you really think it's wise to keep her here, James?”

“Flora gave her into my charge,” James said in a flat, heavy voice. Though genuinely fond of his mother, he wished she were not so suspicious and harsh at times. She had been the same way with Flora when James had first married her.

“The girl's never been anything but pampered a day in her life,” Elizabeth said. “She'll be a great deal of trouble.”

“She's willful, but she isn't bad-hearted,” James said firmly. “You can teach her to be useful. I will not neglect my duty to Flora's sister now that Flora cannot see me do it. I have made it clear that she is expected to obey and work patiently while she is here. Find Amy some tasks to do, and I will see that she does them.” He rose and walked to the window, staring out into the darkness through the sparkling frost patterns on the glass.

Elizabeth gave a sharp, irritated sigh. “It will probably be more work teaching her to do something useful than to do it myself.”

“Probably,” James said. “But you will do it all the same, Mother, for my sake.” *As I do for Flora's*, he concluded mentally. It was only that which sustained him now. Flora, gentle and merry, had been the light of his existence, and the memory of his duty now served as a kind of moon—a silvery reflection of her golden warmth.

“And what when it's time for you to marry again, James? It's very well to grieve, but you won't be in mourning forever. What lady will like to come into a home with not just your mother, but your dead wife's sister in it?”

James gripped the windowsill tightly, his knuckles whitening, to try not to shout at Elizabeth. “I will certainly not neglect my duty to my wife on grounds that her successor would not approve.” He shook his head wearily, then pushed himself upright and turned around, forcing a dim smile. “Amy isn't the only one who needs an early night tonight,” he said, and approached Elizabeth to kiss her cheek. “Good night, Mother.”

His mother's worried gaze followed him halfway up the stairs.

Chapter Two

It was just after six o'clock, and the sun had not yet risen in the sky, but Amy had no sense of refreshment as she arranged her hair in the small looking glass over her bureau. The rich tints of her thick braids caught the candlelight in bright glints, but her face was still pale and tired. She could not fit into the mourning dresses Flora had sewn for her two years before unless she wore the tight, severe corset she'd been forced into at school, where she had been taught to wear the cruel device both waking and sleeping. Thus she was perpetually short of breath and ill rested, especially now, when sorrow taxed the little rest her poor cramped body might otherwise have gained. But she could not ask James for new mourning dresses, not when his dislike of her was so plain.

Amy took a quarter of an hour reading through her devotions, as she'd been taught by her gentle father, then went downstairs, where she found James and Mrs. Ashfort already halfway through their porridge and bacon. James paused, lowering his newspaper and nodding to acknowledge her, then drew a piece of paper out of his waistcoat pocket. "Amy, I have made up this timetable for you. Please read it over now," he instructed, passing it to her.

She was unpleasantly taken aback at this imposition so early in the day, and the sight of the detailed schedule disheartened her. "And will the foreman be timing me with his pocket watch?" she demanded.

James frowned. "If need be, yes. But if my workers keep more regular and productive hours than you do, that's not for you to boast of, I don't think. Do you have any other questions?"

Amy scowled, but scanned his neat, business-like writing and the order of activities. It was, in truth, a much simpler and more relaxed schedule than the one she'd described to him the night before. There were hours for study, paying and receiving calls with Mrs. Ashfort, piano practice, and plain knitting or sewing. Apart from the fact of being a written imposition of his will, it was not a particularly harsh regimen, and it relieved the worry Amy had had that he meant to make a drudge or servant of her. "Out of doors every day after lunch?"

"Yes—you may run errands for Mother or walk for exercise, weather permitting. I will not send you out in a snowstorm, but I will not let you idle in doors for a little damp. Anything

else?”

“What am I to study?” she asked, with a weariness that both James and Elizabeth took for languid insolence.

“I will give you some books after breakfast,” James said curtly. “And I will find out some French and German for you to practice on. I hope I needn't make it clear that any disobedience or failure in your duties will be sternly corrected.”

“If you really hoped that, you wouldn't have said it, after all,” Amy put in.

There was a sort of snort from Elizabeth Ashfort which Amy thought might have been disguising something of a laugh. Her suspicion was strengthened when James gave his mother a rather indignant glance, as if she had failed to support him. He lifted his newspaper, effectively ending the discussion. But when breakfast was done, he took Amy into his study, which was only a small room behind the drawing room, but the desk and bookcases were comfortable and well used. He hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Have you read Miss Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy*?”

Amy shook her head rather listlessly, and silently received the volume from him. “You may study in here if you like,” James offered, and if Amy had been of a humor to notice it, there was something hopeful and conciliatory in his speech.

“I may as well not study at all,” Amy said, not looking at him. “For you only want the chance to punish me—I suppose you'd be disappointed if I learned the book and you found nothing to whip me for.”

James gritted his teeth, the gentleness leaving his face directly. “Amy, I doubt very much I shall want for opportunities to correct your spoiled, willful behavior. I would therefore suggest you study and prepare yourself to be questioned on the material you are given.” His dark, angry eyes were fixed on Amy, waiting for her to submit.

Amy threw the volume down heavily on the table so it made a loud thud and began to sit down, head tossing and looking very pettish, but James caught her arm before she was quite seated, yanking her to her feet. “That book,” he said harshly, “I bought with my wages when I was twelve years old. And every one of these I have purchased with money I have earned. You have not learned the value of money or books, Amy, but you will learn them this morning.”

“I'm s-sorry...” Amy began to stammer, perceiving him to be really angry, but then she gave a loud yelp as James pushed her over the heavy surface of the desk. He put her arm behind

her back, twisting it firmly enough to be secure, but not cruelly, pinning her other arm under her body and holding her down with fierce strength. Then he reached down and pulled up her heavy woolen skirts and began unfastening her crinoline. Though he kept Amy well pinned, she was too worried now about what he was going to do to fight him and lay mostly quietly under his hand. And though she shivered, it was not all from fear—there was a strange thrill to being pinned there so helplessly, his strong hands mastering her young body easily.

“Lift up your feet,” James ordered, and when Amy obeyed, he pulled off the stiff crinoline and laid it aside. He took advantage of her moment of imbalance to push her further forward over the tall desk, so that her full weight rested on the furniture, and her feet dangled becomingly. She gave a little cry of dismay at that, and wriggled while he continued dealing with her voluminous undergarments, bunching up her petticoats at the waist and finally untying the wide ribbons that held her linen drawers closed at the back.

“Oh, no,” Amy pleaded, her voice quivering, as she felt the cool air hit her skin. “James, please...I will study quietly, only please don't...”

“I haven't asked you a question,” James said, and he slapped her rear hard with his hand. “When I want you to speak, I will do so.” He caught up a thick, heavy oaken ruler off the surface of the desk. Without any further parlay, he lifted it and began spanking Amy's pale, softly rounded bottom with hard, stinging smacks. “I've tolerated your disrespect long enough, Amy. You will learn to obey with a good grace and no backtalk. It's no kindness to let you continue like a spoilt child for an hour longer. Now be still and take what you have earned.” He continued spanking hard and fast, layering bright pink stripes over the curve of Amy's backside and down her thighs in methodical progress.

Amy was horribly uncomfortable—more even than James had intended, for the position he held her in made her stays dig painfully into her hips, and robbed her of most of her breath. So Amy cried, and let out little gasps of pain as the ruler cracked down across her soft bottom again and again, but she did not protest or fight. Only one little hand scrabbled against the desk as she tried, and failed, to find some purchase to brace herself. But after a few long, hard minutes of the ruler heating up her backside, she ceased in even that effort and simply sobbed as her skin grew raw and painful. She had been really penitent when he had first reproved her, speaking of how he had bought the book from his boyhood wages, but now bitterness filled her heart as the thought filled her mind over and over that Flora had only been buried yesterday, and here he was

mistreating her. And she clung to the thought the more from knowledge that she had really earned the punishment. Though Flora had been too gentle to discipline her little sister often, their mother would have whipped her far before she had spoken so much, so boldly. But James was not her mother, and he was not Flora. He was hard and cold and cared for nothing but his business—and Flora, but she was gone now.

Flora, Flora, Flora. All paths seemed to lead to the older sister who had left Amy behind, all alone in a world so cruel and uncaring. Amy's whole body was racked with sobs now, so that James, who had been surprised by her lack of fight, was now frightened by the violence of her sorrow. He stilled his hand, then lay down the ruler, releasing Amy slowly so that her feet, in their dainty kidskin slippers, touched the floor lightly, and then freeing her. But Amy sank to the floor on her knees, burying her face in her arms, her cries not lessening even slightly. She had not wept after Flora died, though she had shed many tears while her sister suffered. But since her spirit had fled, Amy had not shed a single tear, until now, when frenzied grief overtook her entirely.

“Amy,” James said in a low voice, and he stretched out his hand to his sister-in-law where she wept on the floor. But he stopped short of actually touching her, and Amy did not see him do it.

“Just leave me be,” Amy choked out wildly. “Leave me here to die. I wish I would...”

James stood, very rigid and still for a long moment, then finally knelt down beside Amy, though he did not embrace her. But he said quietly, “We're neither of us like to die, Amy, and there's no help for that. We must go on as best we can.”

“I can't,” Amy sobbed, her fists clenching. “I can't bear it.”

“You must,” James said somberly. “You shall. I will help you, Amy, don't cry now.”

“Help me?” Amy didn't speak bitterly now, but in bleak amazement. How could he think to help her, when her bottom was still throbbing and hot from his stern treatment? She looked up at him, her eyes swollen and sore, her lips trembling softly. “I am eighteen, and everyone who ever loved me is dead.”

James gave a long, unhappy sigh and rose, then held his hand out to help Amy rise. She accepted it, but when she stood, her drawers pooled around her ankles, and she stooped to snatch at them. But James caught her arm. “Stay still. I will send in the maid to help you correct your dress. Then you are to sit down and study quietly until my mother wants you later in the

morning. Is that understood?"

"Yes, James," Amy said in a tiny, unhappy voice. Her face was crimson with shame, and she let out another low, quivering sob as soon as he had gone. She found a handkerchief and wiped her eyes frantically, trying to erase the marks of tears, but she only succeeded in making her face blotchy and her eyes redder than they'd been before. The little maid who had helped her dress that morning came in to help her with her crinoline, and Amy was silent, mortified at how obvious it must be that she had been spanked. When she was properly dressed again, Amy sat down with the volume whose rough treatment had earned her correction and opened it carefully, bowing her head to study. For though the frantic sorrow was not gone from her heart, James's clear directions had somehow quieted it, and without that, Amy had nothing left at all.

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James had a long, hard day at the mill, between taking in a large new order, having to bargain with his suppliers for quick delivery, and then dealing with an injury on the floor. He had sent the injured boy to the infirmary for treatment, but it had delayed production—something he could hardly afford. When James finally sat down at the dinner table that evening, he had not shaven since before breakfast, and he knew he looked rumpled and weary. His work had effectively pushed the painful encounter with Amy out of his mind, but as he saw her at the table, the atmosphere seemed tense and heightened, as though no time had passed at all since he left her in the study. She was quiet and avoided his gaze, and James did not immediately address her, but spoke with his mother about the day's business.

But he was acutely aware of Amy the whole time, just as he was always aware of the empty chair where Flora should have been. One sister was all too present, the other gone forever. But Amy ate her dinner docilely enough, under Elizabeth's critical eye. She was not a bad girl, and James did not really dislike her. But she had played some unpleasant pranks on him when she was a young girl and furious with him for taking her beloved sister from their home. Though he had not exactly held a grudge, it still colored his understanding of Amy, and he had more than once in the past considered putting his willful little sister-in-law over his knee for a hard spanking. Yet he'd not expected to be so riveted by her, or by the act of spanking her. It had been a strange revelation, watching Amy's pretty head toss as she bit her lip and gasped, while her soft, ripely round bottom jumped with every blow...

It was only that he wanted to help her, James reminded himself sternly. Flora had made him promise to look after Amy, begging him to be kind to her little sister, for her sake. It wasn't kindness to let Amy develop a bad habit of throwing tantrums in the face of unpleasant reality. He was aware that her situation was pitiable, an orphan with her beloved sister now dead and no fortune to speak of. But he did not want to consider that. Wasn't it enough that he had to bear his own grief without being responsible for hers? Yet he had felt, afterwards, a little sorry to have spanked her so soon, when she was so fragile. The way Amy had crumpled on the floor had hurt him, and the nakedness of her grief had threatened to unleash his own mirrored sorrow, which James kept fiercely controlled. If he let himself consider Flora, he could not continue. He could not work, he could not be the son, the brother, the man they all expected him to be. His yearning for Flora was like sorrowing into an endless void; it depleted him and left him stiff and silent as he battled through his daily tasks.

“Were you a good girl today, Amy?” James asked after a pause in conversation.

Amy started a little at being addressed, and when she lifted her head to look at him, she seemed troubled searching for words. “I think so,” she said finally, avoiding his eyes. Apparently considering that sufficient response, she addressed herself to her plate again in silence.

“She did all you ordered,” Elizabeth confirmed, though she did not speak either praise or censure of Amy's performance. “I set her to work on making up some new bed linens.”

Amy's unhappy, almost timid performance troubled his conscience again, and James tried to speak gently to her. “Did you walk far today?”

“Not very far,” the girl responded, with a similar hesitation to consider before she spoke. “I walked in the vale off Church Street.” Though she was courteous, humble even, James could not shake the feeling that she was almost entirely abstracted from the situation, mentally, and it cost him another pang. He had promised to help her, that morning, but how could he help her when she was so remote, so distant, locked in a fortress of her own heart? She was so unlike Flora; Flora's heart had been warm to everyone—even one as hard as himself. Her own goodness was so abundant it had spilled over, it had inspired him and made him more tender, more patient, a better man. Now Flora was gone, and James would never again touch that sweet wellspring of devotion that had made him strong.

Yet he had still his duty to Flora, to that at least he could cling, and when dinner was done and he was in the drawing room with his mother and Amy, James said, “Amy, will you be

good enough to play for us?” He wanted to offer some compliment, but he was stiff and clumsy and could not think of any, though he thought her music very lovely.

At that, Amy actually looked at him, and she dipped her head just slightly in assent, then went to the piano. At first, casting a shy look sideways at him, she played a stately, highly technical Handel piece, as though she thought he were testing her. But over the course of playing the piece, she became steadily absorbed in making music, and a kind of peace fell over her. Watching her intently, James could see her lips grow soft as she inhabited the melody expressively. She was very beautiful then, with the candlelight from the piano casting a soft halo about her bright hair, though her form was so heavily shrouded in black. Relaxed from the act of playing, Amy moved into a simpler medley of Scottish airs, wistful but sweet.

James closed his eyes and leaned back as she played. Flora had not been musical, or he could not have borne it. But Amy's delicate touch on the piano expressed a tender, melodic echo of the roaring, chaotic pain in his heart, and for a few moments, James allowed himself to suffer some of the debt of grief that lay waiting for him, one he would never be able to escape, but must pay one way or another. His breathing grew a little unsteady as his throat grew thick and tight. Flora, his sweet lost Flora...

He lost track of time then, and was startled out of his reflections by Amy's voice from directly in front of him. “May I be excused, please?” James blinked a little. He did not know when she had stopped playing, was not sure if he had slept or merely been too distracted to notice.

“Yes,” he said, his voice a little husky, and he sat up, clearing his throat and tugging a little at his cravat. It seemed inadequate, and he continued, in a hurry, “If there is any music you want that is not here, my sister, Charlotte, can get it for you, I am sure.”

“Thank you,” Amy said slowly, and then she leaned down to press her lips to his cheek. She was soft and warm, and the brief contact made James's heart thunder so that he almost fancied she would perceive it. She had been soft and warm under his hand, too, and her new docility was thanks to that experience, he reassured himself. It had been stimulating to see her submit to him, and he had to remind himself again that he had done it only for her own good, to help her settle down and obey.

Amy repeated the salute for his mother, curtsied, and left the room. Elizabeth, who had been for the most part dourly silent all night said, “She's been meek as a church mouse all day.

You beat her, I suppose?" She did not pause in her knitting.

"I spanked her—and it was thoroughly earned, I can assure you."

"I daresay," Elizabeth returned. But there was something unusual and hesitant in her voice as she continued. "Do not be very hard with her, James. She is much paler than she used to be, and if she should be consumptive like—"

"Don't say that," James snapped, his head jerking up. "She is not going to die, Mother, don't be ridiculous."

"I don't say she will, but—"

"We're not discussing this," James said sharply. "I corrected her this morning because she was defiant and ill-mannered, and I will continue to discipline her as I see fit. You need not order me to avoid cruelty, I hope, Mother."

Elizabeth sighed, giving up. "No, James."

"She only wants a firm hand—she's obedient enough when sternly corrected. I mean to see that as long as she is here, she learns respect and the docility that will serve her well in life. I do not take pleasure in punishing her, I am only performing my duty."

Yet that night, as he lay in bed, it was not in particular a sense of duty that made James recall with unwilling vividness the way Amy had squirmed and gasped and how her soft thighs had reddened under the smacks of his ruler. Nor was it precisely duty that made him wonder how long Amy's good behavior would last, and when he would again chastise her. Still, it was preferable to considering only the coldness of his bed and how he would never again feel Flora's fingers creeping up his spine to tell him she was awake, never again turn into her arms, never lay his head on her soft breast or see her eyes shining at him with love...

Yes, anything was preferable to that.