



The
**HIGHLAND
WARLORD'S**
Kiss



HIGHLAND MYTHS
TRILOGY



BOOK 2

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The Highland Warlord's Kiss

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CHAPTER 1



*F*lora felt the gloom of the cloudy day. It lay as heavily on her as the snow on the towering pine trees. Her glance went to the line of warriors plodding along in front of her atop their horses. They weaved a path through the heavily forested area, their heads up, their eyes watchful, and their weapons close at hand.

She tucked her cloak tighter against the cold and the pervasive gloom and stretched her body up on the saddle to see if she could spot her husband.

Husband.

Not seeing him, she relaxed back down on the horse. How was it she had a husband? She shook her head. It had all happened so quickly that she was still trying to comprehend it. She had not been long at her uncle's home, Chieftain Newlin of Clan Strathearn, when she found herself forced into a marriage. Their departure had been rushed after her husband received a message, the contents which he had not shared, that had them departing immediately.

Another look and she spotted her husband riding toward her... Lord Torin of Clan Norham. He was far from difficult to glance upon, his features quite appealing and it seemed most women thought that way since when they came upon women at crofts they stopped at or travelers they came upon, there was not a woman who could take her eyes off him. Of course, his smile that seemed to tempt and tease in one look helped it along. He was also lean and muscled and had the most intense dark eyes she had ever seen. They teased and tempted just as

much as his smile, and his dark hair that fell carelessly to his shoulders only added to his undeniable appeal.

Fine featured or not, Flora had had no intentions of getting married and being dictated to for the rest of her life, and yet here she was wed, and still trying to comprehend how she got here. Her mum had warned her not to be so quick in rejecting Henry's offer of marriage, pointing out that he was a malleable man who would make no unreasonable demands on her. Flora had argued she looked upon Henry as nothing more than a friend. Her mum had advised that marrying a friend could be the start for a good marriage. Flora disagreed, mostly because she had had no plans to wed. Her mum reminded her that she and Da would not be around forever and that life was not easy for an unwed woman. Her mum had been right about both.

Her husband turned a smile on her when he caught her eye and she found herself returning it. The man's smile had to be contagious since she had found it irresistible to ignore, her smile responding to his in kind every time. Not that she minded smiling. A smile did the soul good, like now, lifting the gloom that had weighed on her.

Still, though, she had not wanted a husband, and yet she had one.

"Doing well, wife?" he asked as he turned his horse to ride alongside her.

"Well enough, husband."

"No complaints, a good sign in a wife," he said quite pleased.

She nodded and smiled like a dutiful wife wishing she did not have to stay in the marriage yet thinking there was nothing else left for her. Marriage to Torin had been her only recourse.

"You also mind your tongue more than not, which is something I appreciate since I am not partial to chatty women."

If only he knew, but then it would not be long before he found out that she rarely held her tongue. She had been taught to express her thoughts and opinions, and it was only due to a

recent illness that had troubled her throat that she had had to limit her talk.

She thought it only fair to give him some warning. “I do speak my piece, my lord.”

His smile teased, but his dark eyes warned. “Not too often, though.”

Words could produce a battle if one let them, and some battles simply were not worth fighting. She kept a pleasant smile herself when she asked, “Will the cleric who travels with us leave us soon? I believe I recall you saying he traveled with us for safety concerns.”

“You are observant,” Torin said, eyeing his wife with a questionable tilt of his head.

“Curious, my lord,” she corrected softly.

“Curiosity can bring on endless questions, another thing I will not abide from my wife,” he cautioned.

“I will do my best,” she offered. “And the cleric?”

“Not your concern,” he said, his smile having faded some. “Tell me, wife, does your curiosity extend to the marriage bed?”

If he thought to have her shy away in embarrassment, he was mistaken. She was eager to respond, but a fierce scream tore through the woods and the next thing she knew her husband flung himself at her, his arms locking around her tight as he took them both to the ground.

“Stay down,” he ordered and got to his feet in a flash, yanked his sword from the sheath on his back, and swung at the man descending on him with a vicious scream and raised sword.

Fear froze Flora. She had listened to her da and his friends when battles had been discussed but they paled in comparison when amid a live battle. The fierce roars that pierced the air were worse than mighty thunder. The continuous clank of metal as swords clashed deafening, the anguished cries of pain from the wounded and dying terrifying, the sight of bodies

falling one after the other a nightmare, the spray of blood staining the pure white snow horrifying, and the dreadful odor that wretched her stomach that she prayed she would never smell again, kept her too fearful to move.

She remained huddled on the ground as her husband fought in front of her taking down anyone who dared to challenge him.

The Highlands hold great beauty and great danger.

She had been told that by her uncle and reminded again by Lord Cree. He had advised her to learn how to survive the Highlands. How did one learn to survive such savagery?

To her, the battle seemed to go on forever as she watched warrior after warrior fall while she prayed and prayed for it to end.

“Flora. Flora,” Torin said and gave his wife a shake as he pulled her to her feet. “Are you all right?”

Flora gazed at him, not quite sure of anything, though her eyes went wide when she spotted the blood dripping along the side of his face. “You are bleeding.”

“It is nothing. You were not harmed?” he asked.

When she did not respond immediately, her husband’s hand slipped beneath her cloak and roamed over her chest and along her waist.

“Nay! Nay!” she said quickly, his intimate touch having shocked her. “Is it over?”

“Aye, a small band of mercenaries who unwisely attacked skilled warriors,” Torin explained, his hand remaining at her slim waist.

“Why attack?” she asked.

“To rob us no doubt,” Torin said.

Flora thought she caught a note of question in his voice as if he was not quite certain. Normally, she would linger on it, try to discover more, but her mind was far too focused on his hand at her waist. Never having been touched with such

familiarity by a man, she found herself curious that it did not feel unpleasant.

Her eyes soon caught sight of several bodies lying on the ground lifeless and quickly asked, “Your warriors?”

“A few minor wounds, nothing more.” He eased her against him. “You tremble.”

“My first battle,” she said, and surprisingly her body relaxed, as if instinctively, against him and she rested her hand, more like a grip, on his arm as if needing to shackle herself to him.

“You did well, wife,” he praised and meant it. She was pale and obviously frightened, yet she did not shed a tear.

“I cowered,” she said as if ashamed.

“Nay, you did as I ordered and that pleases me. If you had allowed fear to take root and had run, then that most definitely would have proven disastrous.”

“The thought never entered my head,” she admitted, annoyed that she had given no thought to what she might do to help. She had allowed fear to control her and that disturbed her.

“Good. That means you trust me and that also pleases me,” Torin said, thinking he had been wise in choosing to take her as his wife but then he never made foolish decisions. He had been taught better than that.

“We will keep going. I want to reach home by tomorrow morning,” he said, keeping his arm around her waist as he walked her to her horse.

“What of the dead?” she asked, casting a glance around to see the cleric praying over them.

“The forest animals will see to them,” he said. “You still tremble. You need to rest?”

“I need no rest,” she said and hurried her hand off him. She lowered her voice. “I will not show weakness in front of your men.”

“You do me proud, wife,” he said, surprised she had even given thought not to embarrass him and lifted her onto her horse.

It was not so much pride as it was stubbornness, but she would not tell him that. Besides, she would do better riding alone, allowing herself time to calm her trembles and her churning stomach.

“We will talk later,” Torin said after mounting his horse.

“Your wound needs cleansing,” she reminded.

“I will see to it,” he said and rode off, issuing orders to the cleric as he passed by him. “Waste no time on them, Cleric. They deserve no prayers.”

A deep chill shivered Flora. She was just beginning to see the unexpected danger that lurked in the Highlands, and she wondered if she would have the strength or skill to survive it.

* * *

FLORA WATCHED as extra warriors were posted around the camp that night. Even the cleric seemed on edge as if expecting something to jump out of the dark, the way he nervously glanced at the dark woods. And where had her husband been? She had not seen him until they made camp and even then, he had not approached her. Only now after the camp was settled did he walk toward her.

“Is there reason to worry of another attack?” Flora asked when he lowered himself down beside her in front of the campfire. He had cleansed his head wound, a small cut the only reminder of it.

“Nay, no worries,” he assured her.

“Then why do you double the guards and why does the cleric stare with fear into the dark woods?”

“Those are questions you need not trouble yourself with,” Torin said.

The firmness in his voice warned her to let it be, but she ignored it. “But they do trouble me. Is there reason to expect another attack?”

He looked at her oddly and she knew his thoughts. He wondered why she was not as quiet and curious when he had first met her at Clan Strathearn.

“It is an extra precaution that is all,” Torin said, surprised by her questions. He had seen only a hint of curiosity from her at Clan Strathearn and little talk. But it could be fear from the attack that had her questioning him. “I keep safe what is mine. There is nothing to fear.”

What is mine.

Was she simply chattel to him? A possession to do with as he pleased. It was one of the reasons she did not wish to wed. She did not want to be owned. Her parents had wed for love, but that was not the way of it for most couples. Marriages were arranged, couples wed, strangers to each other as she was now.

Trapped. That was what she was... trapped.

Torin stood. “I have things I must see to. Sleep. We leave at dawn and ride until we reach home.”

She watched him join two warriors who talked, then without a glance back disappeared into the woods with them. He never joined her before she slept but morning found him beside her. She was beginning to realize he was a husband who would keep secrets from his wife. They would not be partners and share all as her mum and da had done. She would be nothing more than a possession to him and that did not set well with her.

Flora learned to appear disinterested when talk went on around her so that her da’s friends and acquaintances would carry on conversations in front of her, thinking she paid them no heed. She had learned much having acquired such a skill and she intended to make use of it now.

She stood and walked slowly around the camp, glancing around, stretching her shoulders back, pushing at the snow on

the ground with her foot as if she discovered something interesting, all the while listening.

“You think he will find him?”

“He will find him.”

“If he is alive.”

“God help whoever may have hurt him.”

“Or worse killed him.”

“Lord Torin will tear him apart piece by piece.”

“He will find Kinnell have no doubt.”

Flora settled herself back down on the blanket by the campfire. She surmised what she could from what she had heard. Kinnell had arrived with Torin at Clan Strathearn. She had learned he was not only Torin’s tracker but a longtime friend. She had not seen him much while on their journey. Giving it thought, he must have been off seeing if there were tracks of any kind that might prove a threat to them. That they had been attacked without warning meant that something must have prevented Kinnell from warning them. And with only having seen her husband for a short time after they had camped, she concluded that he had been searching for his friend the whole time and now continued to do so.”

Her glance went to the cleric, still staring off into the dark woods, and she decided to see if he knew anything.

She walked over to him, studying him as she went. He was short and had a disheveled look about him and the odor that drifted off him was proof that his brown robe and body both needed a good washing.

“I do not mean to disturb you, Cleric,” she said softly, “but I could use your guidance.”

“Of course, my child, sit,” he offered and patted the spot beside him.

Flora sat glad for the strong scent of the burning wood that helped mask the cleric’s odor. “I was hoping you could give me some guidance on how to best serve my husband.”

She had to clear her throat since she felt as if she choked on her false words.

“Submit, my child,” the cleric said, “submit to your husband’s wisdom.”

“He knows best in all things?” she asked with an innocent tone.

“Aye, he knows best. Submit to his will and be a good wife.”

“He is wise, and I must trust him,” Flora said.

The cleric bobbed his head. “Aye, my child, you understand.”

“I do trust him. I trust that he brings you to Clan Norham for a reason, a good reason,” she said, staring into the cleric’s eyes and seeing fear, and took a hunch. “You will help us?”

Beads of sweat broke out on the cleric’s brow. “I will try, but if the myth proves true, there is little I can do.”

“Aye, the myth,” Flora said, nodding as if she knew of what he spoke.

“Aye, the giant could prove troublesome.”

Giant? There was a giant in her new home? She had to know more and took a chance. “And for a good reason.”

“Some believe so. After all, he was the one who tore part of the mainland free with his huge hands to form the Isle of Outerson and set it adrift to settle in the middle of the loch. The giant continues to reside there forever protecting the isle and the clan who inhabits it, the fierce Clan Norham.”

“He still inhabits the isle?” she asked, appearing frightened, though not believing such a tall tale.

“His ghost does. He resides in the keep and leaves no one in peace.”

CHAPTER 2



Flora woke that next morning to voices not that far from where she lay. Two men talked and she recognized one voice as her husband's. She peeked through squinted eyes to see he was sitting opposite the fire from her, Kinnell next to him. It was clear by his swollen eye and split lip that he had been in a fight. She closed her eyes and listened.

"I did not spot his tracks until too late," Kinnell said. "He is a good tracker, though not a fighter. I would have claimed victory and saved you a battle if someone had not struck me from behind."

"You have a good-sized lump," her husband said. "See what Iona says about it when we reach home."

Kinnell laughed. "I can already tell you what the witch of a healer will say... it is far from your arse."

"She does have a blunt tongue to her but ask her anyway."

"Blunt? It is a wicked tongue she has," Kinnell said, laughter still in his tone.

Silence followed for a moment before Torin said, "This attack disturbs me. This area of the woods is barely traveled. There isn't a trampled path to be found. So, what was a band of mercenaries with a tracker doing here?"

"I wonder the same myself," Kinnell admitted. "There is nothing to be found here, except you on your way home with your new wife."

His words turned both men silent for a few minutes.

“Have you made her aware of the ghost?” Kinnell asked.

“Not yet.”

“You cannot sleep in the keep upon our return. She will run screaming from the place,” Kinnell advised.

“We will stay in the cottage next to the keep,” Torin said, sounding none too happy about it.

“How long has it been since anyone has slept in the keep?”

“Endless months,” Torin admitted. “Once dusk falls no one wants to remain there.”

“Can you blame them? Moans, a strange sweeping cold, doors found opened after they had been closed or closed after left open. Fires lit in hearths found cold when they had been lit. The giant’s ghost wants the place to himself.”

Kinnell’s voice turned low, and Flora was glad the fire had dwindled, and the crackle of the flames were not as loud.

“And do not tell me you do not believe in ghosts. We both saw one that day in the woods. Your grandfather, Hamish. He looked straight at you, gave a wave, and walked off, vanishing into thin air. When we returned to the keep, we discovered he had died hours before then. If only one of us had seen him there surely there’d be doubt, but we both saw him as clear as day.”

“But the giant doesn’t show himself,” Torin argued.

“He never has so why should it be any different now? I still say he is upset about something and if we find out what it is, he may settle down once more and you can once again occupy the keep as well as having gatherings there. The clan misses the gatherings, especially the winter ones when we are stuck in our own homes and long for the company of others.”

“The cleric may help us. He can bless the keep and pray for the ghost to be laid to rest,” Torin said, sounding hopeful.

Kinnell’s voice turned even lower. “He looks as if he cannot even help himself.”

“He was the only one willing to journey here.”

Kinnell snorted. “We will see how long he lasts.”

Flora heard them stand and walk off talking. She opened her eyes but not fully until she saw they were a distance away, their backs to her. Others were starting to wake as well, which is what must have brought their talk to an end.

A ghost, most definitely, would be a challenge and a challenge always brought with it a gain in knowledge. This marriage might prove interesting after all.

The morning departure was rushed, no food offered, everyone eagerly mounting their horses, ready to leave. It was obvious they all wanted to get home.

Flora waited by her horse for her husband.

He arrived with a smile that meant to charm and, of course, it did to Flora’s dismay. She had to take more care in letting his smile appeal to her. It did little to help her see what her husband hid behind his smile.

* * *

IT WAS near mid-day when Torin rode his horse up beside his wife’s mare. “It won’t be long before we reach home.

Flora nodded, waiting to see what he would discuss with her, and the topic caught her off guard.

“You never got to answer me yesterday... about your curiosity,” Torin said, turning a wicked smile on her. “Does it extend to the marriage bed?”

Caught off guard or not, she was quick to reply. “What new wife isn’t curious?”

“Then you will not shy away from it?”

“Isn’t that up to you?” she asked with feigned innocence and continued since he appeared perplexed. “The cleric says I should submit to you for you are wise. If that is so, then would

it not be how wise you are in bed that has me enjoying it rather than shying away from it?"

"You spoke to the cleric?" he asked, giving himself time to think on his wife's surprising response.

Flora, on the other hand, needed no time to respond. "I sought counsel. Were his words not wise?"

"Nay. He is right. It is a wife's duty to submit to her husband," Torin said, but questioned it himself. Did he want a wife who submitted to his touch out of duty or one that did so out of desire? But he did have a skilled hand when it came to women. "I will make it most enjoyable for you."

"Please, tell me what to expect so I am not ignorant of what we will share," she urged, wanting him to think she was anxious. Her mother, bless her soul, had talked with her about intimacy between a man and a woman. She told her she would not have her go ignorant to her marriage bed as she had done, but she had been ever so grateful that her husband had been knowledgeable and had made it pleasurable for her.

"There will be time for such a talk when we arrive home," Torin said.

"Aye, my lord. I look forward to it... and to settling into the keep as well." She saw it. It was slight but she saw his smile falter at the corners of his mouth, though he caught it fast enough.

Since learning from the cleric about the ghost, she knew she would have to learn for herself what was going on.

A warrior was suddenly upon them. "My lord, you are needed up ahead."

Torin nodded. "I will be right there."

He gripped his reins ready to ride off but stopped. "We will talk later, wife, though I think it would be much better if I showed you instead of tell you how to submit in the marriage bed."

Flora was not surprised by the fluttery sensation his remark had caused within her. Her mum had cautioned her about it,

explained how natural it was and how it would evolve into even more pleasure if the moment was right and the man skilled enough to see it flourish in her. She had to admit she was curious about it since when her mum had explained the act itself, she thought it quite unappealing. How would him driving his shaft into her be at all pleasant? Her mum had assured her otherwise. She still was not quite sure about it, but she was curious. And what better way to satisfy her curiosity than to find out for herself.

The only thing that troubled her was that her mum had explained those sensations came about when attracted to a man, preferably one's husband, and especially his touch. She did not mind his touch at all. It was pleasant enough and he was not rough with her as she had heard some husbands could be. Could she be more attracted to him than she realized? But would that not be a good thing if she was meant to bear him bairns and spend the rest of her life with him?

Bear him bairns.

She was not ready to bear him bairns. She barely knew him and though his smile appealed, it also masked secrets. She would not get with child until she spent time with him and learned more about him. She wisely had gotten a mixture from Hertha, the young healer at Clan Strathearn, before departing that would prevent her husband's seed from taking root. She had started taking it and would continue to do so until she thought it safe to do otherwise.

An hour later a warrior directed her to the front of the line to ride alongside her husband.

"All is well, husband?" she asked.

"It is and we are not far from home," he said, and as they made a turn in the bend, the forest disappeared and a loch sat before them, the Isle of Outerson right in the middle.

The loch appeared smaller than Flora imagined it would be but then she realized it was the sizeable isle that made the loch appear small. She was surprised, though relieved, to see a stone bridge, wide enough for two riders to ride side by side and low to the water, connecting the isle to the mainland. She

had not liked the thought that she would be stuck on an isle with no way off except by boat. Escape had been on her mind at that time and procuring a boat had been a worry to her, as was a husband who might prove intolerable or the marriage itself. She had to have a plan of some kind, but none had surfaced, and she had continued to caution herself to accept her fate and make the most of it.

Torin could tell by the way his wife's eyes brightened as they settled on the bridge that it surprised her. "My grandfather started the bridge, and it was finished in my da's time. It made it easier to transport things to the isle, and with only one road leading in, it makes it easier to defend."

"It is low to the water. Does it ever flood?" she asked, something she felt would be good for her to know.

"On occasion," Torin said, though did not elaborate.

Flora felt the excitement of the troop as they crossed the bridge. The top of a watch tower could be seen above the treetops and that is what they reached first on arrival on the isle. Warriors greeted Lord Torin and the troop with shouts of cheers as they passed by them. Crofts soon began to appear, and the occupants called out cheers of welcome home. The village followed next, and all were equally enthusiastic in their welcome. The warriors began to disperse along the way and only Flora, her husband, Kinnell, and the cleric arrived in front of the keep.

"It has been a tiring journey, my lord," the cleric said. "It is best I see to the keep tomorrow."

"Kinnell will take you to a cottage, yours while you are here and see that you wash yourself and your garments. I cannot abide filth," Torin commanded.

The powerful command in his voice had Flora thinking that he had not sounded that authoritative at Clan Strathearn. However, he was home, and he ruled here.

She did not want him to know she knew about the ghost in the keep but she was eager to have him tell her about it, which had her asking, "Why must the cleric see to the keep?"

“Another question, wife?” he asked his smile teasing but his eyes warning.

“I recall you mentioning his intention was not to journey all the way with us and yet here he is. I but wonder why.”

“Let’s get settled first,” he said.

“Aye, I could do with the heat of a hearth and a hot brew,” she said and turned away from him to make her way up the stairs to the keep.

His hand grabbed her arm, stopping her. “There is work being done in the keep. We will be staying in a cottage for now.”

“What kind of work?” she asked as his firm grip forced her away from the keep.

“Repair work,” he said and headed to a cottage close to the keep.

She continued with her questions. “What kind of repairs and how long will it take?”

“Do not concern yourself with it.”

“But isn’t the running of the keep a wife’s duty?” she asked, her cousin Tavia trying to explain in what little time they had together what was expected of her as wife of a clan lord.

“I will let you know your duties,” Torin said, attempting to temper his annoyance.

“The sooner I am aware of them, the sooner I can see to them,” she said.

He wondered where the quiet woman he had met at Clan Strathearn had disappeared to. She had barely uttered a word and asked little to no questions. Had he been duped into thinking his wife was something she was not?

“Enough!” he snapped. “I will tell you when I am ready to tell you.”

He pushed the door open to the cottage and let her precede him in. It was a good-sized place, though the fireplace was

small, and she feared it might not heat the room sufficiently. A table and benches enough for two sat in the middle of the room while a bed that would fit two people snugly was tucked in a corner. There were pegs in the wall to hang garments and a chest hugged the side of the bed that was not pushed up against the wall.

“Your things will be brought here for now,” he said.

“You have no idea when the work in the keep will be completed?” She waited, seeing if he would finally confess about the giant and the keep.

“None,” he said.

Why wouldn't he tell her about the so-called ghost? Did he feel she would recoil in fear and refuse to ever step foot in the keep? That would not happen. She was curious about the giant and his tale. She could just imagine how excited her da and mum would be to discover the truth, to prove the tale nothing more than just that, a tale or prove the myth true. How then would one get rid of a ghost? The prospect was exciting to her, a distraction from the sorrows that continued to plague her since her parents' death. It also offered her a way to be close with her parents once again, share in an adventure as she had done with them.

“I will have a hot brew and food sent here and I will return as soon as I can,” he said, “then we will talk.”

“How is Kinnell? He looked to have been in a fight and I know he was not with us during the attack,” she said, adding the last part since she knew he would use the attack to lay blame on his friend's wounds.

Again, he was struck by his wife's keen observance and wondered over her true nature. He had thought her the perfect wife, demure in manner, quiet, dutiful. He was beginning to think he may have rushed into the marriage, but he needed a wife. He had put off wedding long enough. Besides, he found her appealing from when first he laid eyes on her, and that appeal had grown on their journey here.

“You need not concern yourself with that,” he said. “Now sit and rest. Brew and food will be here shortly. There is time to talk later.”

He walked out the door without another word to her or allowing her another word. She stood staring at the door, a scrunch to her brow, wondering how she could sneak into the keep and explore rather than consider that tonight she would share a bed with her husband until... she turned, and her glance caught the bed, and she realized what would take place there tonight.

CHAPTER 3



“*T*he cleric is settled?” Torin asked, seeing Kinnell approach him.

“Aye, but I think he is useless to us,” Kinnell said.

“I thought that might happen,” Torin admitted and shook his head. “I should have known better once I found out he was dismissed from the monastery, too heavy into his drink to perform his duties.”

“You were desperate.”

“Aye, that I was and still am,” Torin admitted. “Have you seen Iona?”

Kinnell cringed. “That woman sets me on edge.”

“Come, I will go with you?”

“Haven’t you got your wife to settle?” Kinnell asked with a humorous snicker.

“She is settling in the cottage and does fine, though she is full of questions.”

“Odd. She didn’t seem the curious type,” Kinnell said. “She was quiet, barely saying a word when at Clan Strathearn.”

“I know that’s what makes me wonder if there was a reason Newlin was so eager to accept my marriage proposal,” Torin confessed, it having preyed on his mind with how many questions she asked of late.

“You could wait and find out more about her before you seal the marriage vows. Then it would be easy to dissolve the marriage,” Kinnell advised. “Though a man would not tire of glancing on her, if that should matter to you.”

“She is a beauty that’s for sure, but a man could grow tired of her quickly if she chatted endlessly and forever asked questions.” The thought had him scowling.

“True enough. But do you want to start over in search of a wife? You could always teach her to curb her words.”

Torin nodded. “She spoke with the cleric, and he advised her to submit to the wisdom of her husband.”

“There you go. Impart your husbandly wisdom and see it all settled.”

“She does seem to acquiesce easily, so perhaps I worry for naught,” Torin said. “And I have no desire to search for a wife again. This one will have to do. I will need to teach her to follow my rule.”

“A good plan,” Kinnell said.

Torin intended to make it work since when Kinnell mentioned about dissolving the marriage, he had felt a twist to his gut. He barely knew his wife, but he would admit, to himself of course, that he liked her and oddly enough something in him did not want to lose her. So, though he questioned that she might not be as quiet as he first thought, his attraction to her had not changed, if anything, it had grown with their journey home.

He had enjoyed watching the way she would stretch her body awake in the morning and turn a smile to the sky as if she was happy to greet the day. He also enjoyed the way she easily returned his smiles as if she could not resist them. Then there had been the jolt of pleasure that had hit him when he had run his hands over her chest and along her waist to see that she had not been harmed after the attack. He had not expected that, nor had he expected to experience a sudden arousal. At that moment, he had wanted his wife, had ached to have her and that had been a surprise and a pleasant one at that.

“What happened to you?”

The strong, demanding voice had Kinnell cringing and Torin smiling.

“It is nothing. Never mind it,” Kinnell insisted as the healer stepped right up to him, and he stepped back, which made her keep after him until he finally surrendered and stayed put so she could plant herself close to his face to examine his wounds.

Torin watched, always enjoying the push and pull exchange between the two. Iona intimidated with her abrupt nature and her wild appearance. She stood a good head over most men, though stood face to face with Kinnell, not so Torin. He had height over her and over most others. She was slender but muscular and had sharp features that either captured the eye or forced one to look away. Her flaming red hair refused to stay contained no matter what she did to it, so she kept it chopped at her shoulders and gave the curls their freedom. She was young for a healer being only a few years older than Kinnell’s two and twenty years. Though young, she was an exceptional healer.

“I’ve seen worse,” Iona said, stepping away from Kinnell to his relief. “And it is far from your arse.”

Kinnell looked to Torin, a grin on his face silently letting him know he had been right about what the healer would say to him.

“Grin like that and you will split your lip again, you fool,” Iona admonished, her bold green eyes narrowing as they focused on Kinnell.

Torin’s smile grew while Kinnell’s grin faded.

Iona turned her attention to Torin and Kinnell almost sighed with relief.

“So, this wife of yours, is she a strong one or the pampered type?” Iona asked, folding her arms across her ample chest.

“From what I have seen so far, she has strength to her, though the Highlands are foreign to her. Her father was a scholar, having studied and taught at a budding university in

England and she also lived in Edinburgh for a while.” At least that was what he had learned while at Clan Strathearn. He had yet to discuss Flora’s past with her and that might have been a mistake on his part, not learning enough about her.

“Lowlanders, they have no strength to them,” Iona said, scrunching her face with disgust. “The wild Highlands will not only be foreign to her but frightening as well. It will take her time to adapt. You will need much patience with her as will the clan. I will introduce myself and help her in any way I can.”

“I appreciate that, Iona,” Torin said.

“What has she to say about the ghost?” Iona asked.

“That is none of your concern,” Kinnell said.

“It is if I am to help her,” Iona argued.

Torin put a quick stop to their bickering by answering her question. “She does not know yet.”

Iona shook her head. “Do not wait long to tell her or she will hear it from others first and that is not something you want to have happen. She should learn it from her husband, not a stranger.”

She walked away and Kinnell shook his head at her retreating back. “That woman can be exasperating.”

“Maybe you should wed her and teach her to submit,” Torin suggested teasingly.

Kinnell turned a stricken glare on Torin. “Do not even joke like that. Never would I wed such an impossibly irritating woman.” He shuddered at the thought. “But she is right about telling your wife before she hears about the ghost from someone else.”

“That she is,” Torin said. “Walk with me back to the cottage. The message that returned us home was clear that there were many things that need attention here.”

* * *

FLORA NEEDED a distraction from what awaited her tonight in bed with her husband and what better distraction than the ghost. She waited a bit after her husband left, then went to the door and peeked out. When she was sure her husband was nowhere in sight, she slipped out and keeping watch that no one looked her way headed for the keep.

“You should not go there, my lady.”

Flora stopped and turned to see a short, plump woman standing near the back corner of the keep, a covered basket over her arm.

The woman approached slowly and raised the basket. “I have brought food and drink for you. Let me serve you in the cottage where you will be safe and warm and can rest after your long journey.”

Flora remained as she was, not moving either way. “And you are?”

“Verena, my lady,” the woman said with a bob of her head.

Flora smiled. “Derived from the Latin for vera meaning truth, a lovely name that I am sure suits you well.”

Verena appeared perplexed. “Thank you, my lady.”

“Please leave the food in the cottage, Verena, I will eat it at my leisure,” Flora said and turned to continue to the keep.

“Truly, my lady, you should not go in there. It is not safe, and Lord Torin forbids anyone to enter the keep without his permission,” Verena said, worry on her round face and in her gentle voice.

If only Verena had not told her that. How now did she get around not obeying her husband, although she would probably be wise to obey him on occasion. “I know it is believed that the ghost of the giant resides there, and I am curious to see for myself.”

Verena shook her head. “It is not just believed, it is true. The ghost of the giant does reside in the keep, though he never shows himself, but he is heard, and his breath felt.”

That intrigued Flora even more. “Has he harmed anyone?”

“Nay, my lady, he mostly frightens, but one can never tell if he will lose his temper and do harm. That is why it is better to stay away, not annoy or provoke him and cause more problems than already exist.”

It was thoughtful the woman worried over her, but Flora could not let that stop her. “I appreciate your warning, Verena, but once my curiosity takes hold there is no stopping it. We will talk again and thank you for the food and drink.”

With that Flora left a stunned Verena staring after her as she hurried up the steps to the keep and disappeared inside.

Flora stood in a narrow room, unlit torches in brackets on either side of a closed double door. There was a musty odor as if the room had been closed away for some time. Eager to explore, she opened the one side of the double doors, the iron hinges creaking, and entered a large room the only light from a broken wood shutter that hung loose on a window high up on one of the stone walls. A large stone fireplace took up nearly one wall and numerous trestle tables and benches ran on either side of the room in a straight line and up to the long table at the far end, though did not attach to it. A white cloth, covered in dust was draped over it. She realized then she stood in the Great Hall. Tapestries, in need of a good dusting, hung on two walls as well as colored banners. Oil lamps sat atop tall pedestals in various places around the room that would provide sufficient light as well as light from the fire in the large, cold hearth, yet to be cleaned of its ashes.

She spent a few moments listening for any strange sounds, a moan, or the feel of a breath on her, but she heard nothing and felt nothing.

She proceeded to the far-left corner of the hall and through a doorway into a dark, short hallway. She was able to spot another doorway to the left. She tried the handle, but it was locked tight. She returned to the Great Hall and spotted a curving staircase off to the side. The stairs disappeared up into darkness but that did not stop Flora. She braced her hand on the wall and carefully made her way up. She reached a landing where there was a door, or you could continue up the staircase. She chose to open the door.

A gloomy light flooded the room as well as a deep cold. She looked up to see that once again shutters hung broken, and she wondered if the ghost had anything to do with the damage. It was a small bedchamber, thick with dust which meant it had not been used in some time. Metal sconces, their torches dark, were mounted on the walls along with weapons, and chests, some piled three high, were tucked here and there.

She stood a moment and listened but heard nothing. She continued exploring, climbing to the next floor with careful steps since she could barely see in front of her to come upon a bedchamber. It was dark with not an ounce of light, though she did catch a peek of a light on one wall and carefully made her way toward it, bumping her leg only once on a chair from the feel of it. The dim light was trying to force its way through the shutters. Flora reached up to open them, but her fingers just missed the bar that held them closed. She eased her way back from where she had walked and bumped into the chair again. She managed to push it over to the window bumping once into a chest. She climbed up on the chair and yanked the slim iron bar back and pulled the shutters open.

Though the sky was gloomy it was still enough light to reveal the room. It was a large room with a large bed occupying a good portion of it. Dust covered everything and the musty odor she had smelled downstairs was more prevalent up here.

She got down off the chair and pushed it more easily this time to another shuttered window and got that one opened. Light and fresh, cold air flooded the room, and Flora smiled. This was something she could see to, bringing the keep back to life and solving the mystery of the ghost.

“I am here, Giant, I intend to find you so we can talk,” she called out and jumped when what sounded like a moan swept into the room on a chilly wind. “So, you heard me. Talk with me.”

Her words were met with complete silence, and she gave it thought. Her da did not believe in ghosts while her mum was not sure. Her da insisted there was an explanation for everything if one looked hard enough and did not give in to

fanciful thoughts. She would weigh both her parents' opinions on this and see where they brought her.

"Talk with me or not, Giant," she said and slipped off her cloak and draped it over the chair. "I am here to stay, and I do not frighten easily." She thought a moment. "Except in battle, battle does frighten me. Now to get to work." She began by pulling the bedding off the bed.

* * *

TORIN'S RETURN to his wife took longer than he would have liked. People stopped him to wish him well on his marriage and to bless him with many heirs. Some also had issues they brought to him, his fault since he had been gone too long from home. He listened patiently, though was impatient to return to his wife. He should have told her the truth about why they would be staying in the cottage. While he had no intentions of discussing certain clan matters with her, he should have been honest about the keep. He hoped that no one had said a word to her about the ghost and he had time to explain it all.

"Worry not, Philip," Torin said, to the older man whose strength was not what it once was and gave a nod to Kinnell. "Kinnell will see that your roof is repaired tomorrow."

"Thank you, my lord. I knew you would take care of it right away. You are a good man. Your grandfather, Lord Hamish, would be proud of you," Philip said.

"I am glad to hear that. My grandda meant much to me," Torin said.

"And you to him, my lord," Philip said.

Torin walked off with Kinnell, thinking about his grandda and wondering how such a good man produced a son that could be cruel at times.

"You are nothing like your da, Lord Evander," Kinnell said. "You are like your grandfather right down to the good features and handsome smile that steals all the lasses' hearts."

Torin laughed. “You know me too well.” And he did. Kinnell and he had been friends since they were young and he also was familiar with what type of man Torin’s da had been, scolding often with his mouth and quick with his hand.

“Aye, which is why I can be truthful with you.”

“And glad I am for it,” Torin said, grateful for his friendship, though it was more a brotherhood they shared. “Now it is time I get back to my wife.”

Torin stopped in front of the keep staring up at it.

“It looks sad,” Kinnell said.

“And neglected,” Torin said, annoyed at himself for allowing the problem to get out of hand.

“My lord,” Verena said, hurrying over to him.

Torin did not like the worry in the woman’s eyes, and he gave a quick glance to the cottage. “Is something wrong with my wife, Verena?”

“I hope not, my lord?” Verena said, twisting her hands in front of her.

“Tell me,” Torin ordered, his stomach gripping tight with worry.

“I warned her not to go. I told her you forbid anyone to enter without your permission, but she went anyway.” Verena looked to the keep.

“My wife is in the keep?” he asked stunned.

“Aye, for a while now and she still hasn’t come out.”

Torin rushed to the steps, Kinnell at his side when the door to the keep swung open and his wife stepped out. The sleeves to her underdress were rolled up, her braid in disarray, the dark strands covered with dust as was most of her, but she wore the biggest smile that lit her face and made her appear even more beautiful.

Flora stood at the top step, happy to see her husband and called out, “The repairs must have been finished in your

absence. I have started cleaning our bedchamber. We can sleep in the keep tonight.”

CHAPTER 4



Torin was ready to make known his anger that she dared to go against his order when he saw that curiosity had people drifting closer to listen.

“Be careful what you say,” Kinnell warned in a whisper. “You do not want your new wife to appear braver than you.”

Torin let a pleasant smile hide his annoyance as he called out, “After a thorough cleaning.”

Flora brushed at her garments, after glancing over herself and a plume of dust rose off them. “I suppose you a right. It will take more than a few hours to clean the keep of its neglect.”

That stung and yet Torin heard not a hint of disapproval or reprimand in her remark. She had simply stated the obvious, the truth of the situation... the keep had been neglected.

Flora hurried down the stone stairs, dust flying off her. “It is a lovely keep and I look forward to bringing it back to life, and, of course, ridding it of the ghost.” She slipped her arm around his, excited to finally have something interesting and challenging to discuss. “Come we will discuss it while we eat. I am famished.”

Torin heard Kinnell chuckle as he walked away, and he also heard chatter. Tongues wasted no time wagging, and he wondered what they were saying.

“Where is your cloak?” Torin asked as he walked along with his wife.

Flora halted abruptly and looked over herself once again. "I forgot. I must have left it in the keep. "I will go fetch it."

Torin stopped her with a firm hand to her arm. "I will have it fetched."

"Who will fetch it when all fear entering the keep?" she asked but gave him no chance to respond. Instead, she continued with questions. "Why didn't you tell me about the ghost? How long has he haunted the keep? Have you seen him or heard him?" She answered some of the questions herself. "Well, of course you must have seen and heard him if you were frightened enough to abandon the keep and with all the dust and cobwebs accumulated there it appears your absence has not been a short one. But your absence could also have been forced due to the lack of people willing to work in the keep."

Her endless chatter had his mind swirling and the way she asked and answered her own questions accurately made him realize that his wife had a sharp and quick mind.

"You must tell me everything about the ghost, the myth, all of it so I have what I need to solve the mystery. It should not take long. Once information is examined and the useless or lies discarded, truth will shine through."

They entered the cottage and Flora went to the table eager for a hot brew, the chill of the keep feeling as if it had seeped inside her.

"The Highlands are far different from the lowlands. The Highlands have a mystery to them that its people accept and respect. It allows all creatures to survive and thrive here, otherwise life would be difficult," Torin said.

"That is good to know. Tell me more," she said and eagerly took a seat at the table to quickly fill two tankards from a pitcher, the distinct scent that of fresh cider. "How did this myth come about?"

Torin joined her at the table, his grumbling stomach reminding him he had not eaten in some time. He speared a

chunk of deer meat with his knife. “It is the story of the birth of the Isle of Outerson home to the Clan Norham.”

“So, you believe that a giant tore a piece of land off to float it out into the loch and create an island?” she asked, repeating what the cleric had told her. “It does not seem plausible, but I can see how such a myth would serve to create a powerful legend for a clan and since the giant protects it, it also serves to keep others away.”

“We are fierce and fearless warriors and—”

“Born of a myth that has a giant protecting all of you, thus making an attack unlikely since as you said there is a mystery to the Highlands that all respect. So, whoever created the legend was wise in doing so.”

Again, he was amazed that she spoke without censure and this time with a hint of admiration. He also realized at that moment that she had involved him in a conversation he had no intention of having with her. He almost scratched his head wondering how she had done that.

He regained charge of the situation that he had lost too easily. “You disobeyed a commend of mine. Verena informed you that I forbid anyone to enter the keep without my permission and yet you entered it anyway.”

Flora shrugged. “I was not raised to be obedient. I was raised to question, to learn, to seek knowledge and gain wisdom. If the keep is to be my responsibility, then I do not wish to waste time in seeing to its care. I meant no disrespect to you, husband, but I was curious to see the keep and when I learned about the ghost my curiosity grew and I could not wait.”

A reasonable explanation and yet... “You need to obey me, wife.”

“Why?” she asked and reached for another piece of cheese and bread.

“You do not question why,” he snapped. “You submit to my wisdom as the cleric advised.”

“What if I am wiser than you, then shouldn’t you submit to me?”

Her response left Torin speechless.

“That would be the logical thing to do, right?” she asked. “The wiser person would know best and, therefore, should rule.”

Torin regained his senses. “I have the knowledge to lead this clan.”

“Of course, you do, and I have the knowledge to solve the mystery,” she said and smiled.

“Only if I allow it,” he commanded, annoyed that to him it felt as if she had set a trap leaving him no choice but to agree that he allow her to solve the mystery, while she simply viewed it as logical.

“Well, you are a wise leader and no doubt see the wisdom of it,” she said.

There was not a hint of sarcasm in her response. He almost shook his head wondering how he ever got into this conversation with her and how he had managed to choose a woman that was the complete opposite of what he wanted in a wife. Had he allowed her beauty to blind him? Had he grown so tired of searching for a wife that he failed to find out more about her? Or did he admit there had been something about her when he first laid eyes on her that tugged at him in a way that no woman ever had?

“When did you abandon the keep?” she asked, continuing her query.

He answered without thinking. “It has been months, the servants too fearful of the place and with the incident—” He stopped abruptly.

“What incident?” Flora asked eagerly.

“A woman was frightened by the giant.”

“Who? I will speak with her. She can tell me all that happened.” Flora’s eagerness grew.

“Nay!” Torin said sharply.

Flora’s eyes turned wide, surprised by his snappish reply. She had realized on the journey here that her husband had a commanding presence and that it was necessary for one who ruled. But he had not had a sharp tongue with her, commanding tongue, aye, but a sharp one, nay.

As was her way, she did not stop from asking, “Why?”

“Because I command it,” he snapped and scowled, annoyed he had offered any explanation at all.

“Why would you not want me to know if it would help solve the mystery of the giant?” She seemed to ask the question more of herself than of him as she stared off toward the fire for a moment and as if suddenly understanding said, “You wish to keep something from me.”

“You ask far too many questions and expect far too many answers.”

“Questions are meant to be answered,” she argued.

“Not all the time and certainly not when a husband tells a wife he has had enough of her questions.”

“Oh, so you do not wish to talk with me any longer?” she asked, disappointed since she had been enjoying their discussion. She had not had such an interesting and challenging conversation in some time. Of course, she went on talking before he could answer. “I thought you might be interested to hear what I know about ghosts.”

“You know about ghosts?” he asked without thinking, but then he was curious.

She went right on talking. “There are varying beliefs and opinions on ghosts. Some believe that the spirit remains after death due to something left unfinished and then there are some who question their death, some who have yet to accept it. There are also those who refuse to believe that ghosts are anything but demons. That is why it is important I learn as much about the giant as possible if the keep is to be restored to its full glory. And I believe an effective way to begin is to see

the keep cleaned from top to bottom and its habitants restored.”

Did he have a choice? Torin did not hold much hope that the cleric would accomplish much, but how did he chance letting his wife see to the problem? He did not want to see her frightened and definitely not harmed. But there was no one else willing to do what she offered, and she did sound knowledgeable.

He feared he might regret it, but said, “After the cleric blesses the keep you can begin having it cleaned.”

Torin almost lost his breath when his wife’s face lit with a brilliant smile and her eyes sparkled and her cheeks turned a soft shade of pink, highlighting her beauty.

“I am most grateful, husband, and I will do you proud,” Flora said with excitement. Maybe, just maybe this marriage would not be as bad or as boring as she had anticipated.

Torin felt the need to warn. “You will keep your tongue to a reasonable chatter.”

“What is reasonable?” she asked.

He glared at her. “No questions and—”

“How can no questions be reasonable?” she asked perplexed. “How am I ever to discover things if I do not ask questions?”

“Of me,” Torin said, slapping his chest.

“But how am I to find out about you, my husband, if I do not learn about you... your likes and dislikes and—”

“I dislike endless questions,” he snapped.

“So then, how many questions am I allowed to ask you in a day? If I know then I can make certain I ask pertinent ones and not waste them on senseless ones, though I do not believe any question is senseless. One never knows what one will learn.”

Torin rose out of his chair while his wife continued talking, walked over to her, grabbed her face in his hands, leaned down, and commanded her silence with a powerful kiss. It was

his intention to show dominance over her, make her obedient to his word, to his rule and there was no reprieve from it. She would submit to his will.

What he did not count on was the way she returned his kiss... with the same demand he had delivered it. And bloody hell if his shaft did not rise to the occasion.

Stunned, Flora had not known what to do, but she let her instinct rule as her mum had told her to do when the time came that she was first kissed. Instinct had her responding in kind to her husband's command to kiss him, which was easy for her to do since she found his kiss quite enjoyable. She loved the power of it, the way he demanded, not letting her shy away but forcing her to participate, to linger in the joy of it.

She was not sure when his tongue made its way into her mouth, but she welcomed it along with a sensation that titillated her all over before settling between her legs. The one thing her mum had told her about coupling, her husband's shaft slipping inside her, that she had thought disgusting now seemed possibly plausible as well as enjoyable.

Flora gasped when her husband ended their kiss abruptly. She had not been ready for it to end. She wanted more.

"You have kissed a man before me," Torin accused, her eager and encouraging response not something found in an innocent woman.

"Nay. That was my first kiss, though my mum did tell me to follow my instinct and that is what I did since I found the kiss quite enjoyable. She also advised me about coupling and how a man's shaft slips between a woman's legs and deep inside her and I must say, at first, I thought it quite disgusting, but your kiss has me thinking differently and I am eager to experience it."

Torin shook his head. Never had he met a woman who could talk so much and say things no woman would ever dare say.

He brought his face close to hers but not close enough where she might kiss him. "You will not talk when we couple,

wife.”

“How will I know if I am doing it right if I cannot ask questions?”

He pressed his finger to her lips. “Not a word when we couple, scream if you’d like but you will speak not a word.”

“Why would I scream? Will you hurt me?” she asked, thinking back on what her mum had explained to her but not recalling her mentioning anything about screaming.

“Pleasure. You will scream with pleasure,” Torin explained and wondered why he continued to answer her questions.

“Truly? It will be that pleasurable that I will scream with delight?” she asked excited at the prospect of such a feeling. Then thought of something her mum had said. “But are you skilled at it? Doesn’t it take a skilled man to bring a woman pleasure? Of course, I think it only fair I learn to bring you pleasure as well.”

Torin didn’t know whether to regret wedding her or be thrilled that he had a wife who wanted to learn to pleasure him.

Flora tapped at her chin with her finger. “Of course, if you are skilled at coupling that would mean you had to have coupled with other women. Maybe I could talk with them to see what I can learn.”

Torin shook his head, appalled at the thought. “Absolutely not. I will teach you all you need to know.”

“You will teach me everything. You will not leave anything out,” she insisted.

Now he was thinking he was a lucky man. “Everything. You have my word, wife.”

“We can start tonight,” she said with a firm nod of her head as if she decreed it.

He was not going to argue that with her. “Tonight,” he confirmed.

She stood abruptly. “I need some people who will help me get the windows open in the keep. It is musty and needs airing.” She took hold of his arm and walked to the door. “We will flood the keep with fresh air and light to make it easier for the cleric, and fires need to be lit in the hearths since it will take time to heat the place and chase the cold away.”

They were outside before Torin realized it. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and was ready to remind her that she was to wait until the cleric got done with the keep before she started anything there.

Instead, the frigid air and the light falling snow had him saying, “You need your cloak.”

She acknowledged with a nod as if it was answer enough and went on talking. “If you and I take residence in the keep, I am sure it will encourage others to at least not fear working there. Do you think Verena would know of those willing to help me?” She spotted the woman and called out, “Verena, a moment please.”

The woman looked stunned as Flora released her husband’s arm and hurried toward her.

She moved so fast Torin hadn’t the chance to stop her. He caught up with her before she reached Verena and grabbed her arm halting her.

“You do not go to a servant, the servant comes to you,” he said and quickly added, “and do not ask me why.”

Flora let the word dissolve on her tongue and waited silently, seeing Verena hurrying toward them.

“How may I help, my lady?” Verena asked when she reached them.

“I need some people to help me get the windows open in the keep and see to the removal of the ashes in the fireplaces.”

Verena’s eyes turned wide, and she looked to Torin. “You permit this, my lord? You and Lady Flora will reside in the keep?”

It was his home, where he belonged, and it was time he returned to it. “Aye, Lady Flora and I will reside there as soon as the keep is made ready.”

“Does that mean the kitchen door will be unlocked?” Verena asked nervously.

“When the appropriate time comes,” Torin said. “Fetch the servants and let them know they are needed in the keep.”

“Gather them in the Great Hall. I will speak to them there,” Flora said and saw that Verena once again looked to Torin for approval. She supposed it would take time for them to get accustomed to the fact that she was in charge of the keep. But then her husband would always have the final say... not necessarily though.

“Finally, the keep will be open as it should be.”

Flora turned with her husband to see a tall woman with bold green eyes and a head full of fiery red, outrageous curls. Kinnell approached from behind her shaking his head, his face clearly revealing he disapproved of her remark.

“Flora, this is Iona, the clan healer,” Torin said.

“I am pleased to—”

“A healer!” Flora smiled with excitement. “A healer at Clan Strathearn helped me when I lost my voice.”

Torin briefly wondered if perhaps Iona could reverse the healer’s help and restore Flora to the quiet woman he had first met.

“There is so much I wish to ask you,” Flora said when Iona went to speak. “I am interested in the healing ways of the Highlands compared to the physicians in the populated cities and curious about the plants you use to help heal people that the physicians know nothing about.” She hurried to the woman and hooked her arm with hers and continued talking, stopping Iona from speaking again. “I have learned some Highland healers have other unique skills as well, though the one healer I had the pleasure to meet was deemed a witch. Of course, that was nonsense, she was simply a wise woman.” Her words

drifted off as they walked a distance away from Torin and Kinnell toward the keep.

“Am I imagining things or did your wife just silence Iona and leave her no choice but to walk off with her?” Kinnell asked, staring after the pair.

“She did,” Torin said, surprised by it himself.

Kinnell broke out in a huge smile and slapped Torin on the back. “Anyone who can command Iona with their tongue alone is a prize. You picked the perfect wife.”

“Did I?” Torin questioned. “She chatters endlessly.”

“Then find a way to quiet her,” Kinnell advised.

A smile spread slowly over his handsome face thinking of their kiss. “I just might have.”

CHAPTER 5



“We must find time to talk about the Highland way of healing, but at the moment I would like to know your thoughts on the ghost in the keep,” Flora said as they entered the Great Hall, where servants were beginning to reluctantly gather.

“One thing I learned from listening to the many Highland myths from the time I was young is that somewhere within the myth is a grain of truth,” Iona said.

“That does make sense,” Flora said nodding. “Just as a grain grows and flourishes so does a tale after shared repeatedly until it becomes—”

“A myth,” Iona was quick to finish, “and one of many myths that formed the Highlands.”

Thinking that way, it was easy for Flora to understand how an extremely large man would be thought of as a giant to most people. He could have laid claim to this isle, thus the tale began, grew as it was shared, until it became a myth. However, even in her short time here in the Highlands, she understood that the people would not be receptive to such a reasonable suggestion. They preferred their myths and so she kept the thought to herself. Though, she might discuss it with her husband.

“There is a belief, though many historians refute it, that giants actually did exist at one time. Unfortunately, there is no proof. It would take finding a few large bones to prove that

giants ever walked this land, but it is an interesting theory and gives one pause to think.”

Iona eyed Flora with interest. “You are knowledgeable for a woman and some men for that matter.”

Flora smiled. “My da believed differently about knowledge. He believed all men, women, and children should gain as much knowledge as possible if society was to not only survive but to mature and thrive. He taught me to read at an early age, told me to never lose my curiosity, never fear to question or debate.”

“*Carpe diem*,” Iona said.

“Seize the day. You know Latin and are familiar with the Roman poet Horace,” Flora said, excited. “You are the second woman here in the Highlands I have met who speaks Latin.”

“I know only a few phrases that my grandmother taught me and that was her favorite one. I wish I had had the time with her to learn more.”

“I can teach you. I learned from my da’s writings and those of his friends and, of course, the scholarly monks, not that I was permitted to read the scrolls. The monks thought me very well-mannered for a young lass when I arrived at a monastery and remained at my da’s side staring over my da’s shoulder at the scrolls the monks allowed him to read. They told him I would make a patient, obedient wife. They never once even considered that I was reading the words along with my da.”

“How exciting and adventurous that must have been for you and how boring the wife of a Highland lord will be for you.”

“Not at all,” Flora said, her smile turning brilliant. “There is adventure in every day if one chooses to look for it.”

“I believe we are going to be good friends, Lady Flora,” Iona said, with a knowing nod.

“I would very much like that, Iona. We will talk again soon. I must speak with the servants now.”

“Aye, my lady. I look forward to speaking with you again,” Iona said with a respectful bob of her head.

Flora walked over to the closely gathered group. There were far less servants than she had expected. “This is a small group to take care of such a large keep, Verena.”

“The kitchen workers are busy and there are a few who are simply too fearful to enter the keep, my lady,” Verena explained.

“Well, we will have to see about changing that,” Flora said confidently and turned to face the huddled group.

“I am the new lady of the keep... Flora, and I want to thank you for coming here,” Flora said with a generous smile and all eyes turned wide.

Verena leaned over and whispered, “You do not need to thank them, my lady.”

“I was taught differently,” Flora said and looked over the curious faces in the group. “Praise and appreciation are deserved for a job well done and I will be generous with both. Also, if you have any concerns or problems, please bring them to me and I will see them settled.” Again, eyes went wide, but Flora went right on talking. “I understand there is a problem with a ghost in the keep which makes many of you and others reluctant to work here. I intend to see the problem solved and the ghost dispatched to a restful place.” That remark got eyes spreading even wider. “Today we will see two tasks done... shutters will be opened, the broken ones repaired, and the fireplaces cleaned of their ashes and made ready to light. If anyone is reluctant to work in any room, please let me know and I will accompany you. Ghosts do not frighten me.”

Eyes could not go any wider, but mouths did drop open.

“We will start with this room, though I will also have at least two volunteers to go with me to Lord Torin’s bedchambers,” Flora announced.

No one stepped forward.

Flora turned to Verena.

“There was an incident in the room that forced Lord Torin to close the keep.”

“What incident?” Flora asked and saw that Verena appeared reluctant to answer.

“It would help me to know, Verena,” Flora encouraged, and the woman’s eyes went to someone in the group of servants. Flora looked to see who Verena had glanced at.

A woman whose dark hair fell haphazardly around her head and down the sides of her pretty face quickly averted her eyes.

“Your name?” Flora called out, pointing at her.

“Anwen, my lady,” the woman said, and the others stepped away from her.

Flora sensed an unease that seemed to settle over everyone and quickly said, “While I speak with Anwen, fetch what you need to get started here in the Great Hall.”

Everyone fled rapidly and Iona slowly made her way to the door.

Flora walked over to Anwen, recalling her husband mentioning something about a woman who had been frightened by the giant. “I assume you had a fright with the ghost.”

“Ah, my lady.”

“And where did this happen?” Flora asked and when Anwen hesitated to respond, she encouraged. “Please, share what happened with me. It would truly help me to know so that I may purge the keep of the ghost.”

“It was in Lord Torin’s bedchamber, my lady,” Anwen said, keeping her eyes downcast as she responded.

“Tell me about it.”

Anwen’s head shot up.

Flora saw fear in the woman’s eyes and sought to comfort. “Worry not. The ghost will not harm you. Now tell me, was it while you did your chores that the ghost came upon you?”

Iona listened from the shadows as she crept to the door and smiled.

Anwen's cheeks flushed red, and her mouth opened but no words fell out.

Flora was about to suggest they step outside seeing how fearful Anwen looked when a thought struck, and she spoke without thinking. "You were in the room with my husband at the time?"

"Aye, my lady, but it is not what many assumed. Nothing happened between us," Anwen said with a nervous tremor. "Please, my lady, please do not punish me."

Flora's brow wrinkled in question. "Why would I punish you? I was not wed to Lord Torin at the time. He could do as he pleased as could you."

Anwen stared at her speechless.

Endless questions began to clutter Flora's head. There was much this woman could tell her not only about the ghost but about Torin. With all the questions she could ask, she shocked herself with the one that fell unfettered from her lips.

"Would you go to Lord Torin's bed now that he is wed?"

Anwen gasped. "Never, my lady, never would I lay with a wedded man and never did I lay with Lord Torin."

"But there are women here who would?" Flora asked, not having given it thought since she believed that a husband and wife remained faithful to each other just as her parents had. Though she knew of some couples, friends of her parents and nobles who supported scholars in their academic endeavors, who had not remained faithful to their vows, and that included both husband and wife. She had seen for herself that those particular couples never seemed satisfied or happy.

Again, Anwen was reluctant to answer.

"Please share with me what you know, or think, Anwen, it would be a great help," Flora encouraged with a gentle smile.

Anwen nodded. "I have seen for myself that there are women and men alike who do not adhere to their vows. I also

know of some men who find that one woman is not enough for them.”

“Could it be that they have yet to find love?” Flora asked, finding the discussion enlightening.

Anwen sighed softly, shaking her head. “Love is rare, my lady. Lust is what most couples share and when gone there is nothing left.”

Iona nodded to herself as she slipped quietly out the door.

* * *

“THERE’S Iona and she’s wearing a smile. I have never seen her smile,” Kinnell said.

Torin turned to see Iona make her way down the stairs and he was surprised himself to see her smiling, the healer having a stoic nature, and for some reason that she smiled worried him.

“I like your wife,” Iona said when she reached the two men. “She speaks her mind and is wise in her words.” Her grin grew. “Though, you might want to get in there since your wife is speaking with Anwen and has some interesting questions for her.”

Torin rushed past Iona and took the stairs two at a time, hurrying to enter the keep.

“Flora!” he shouted once he entered the Great Hall and she and Anwen turned to look at him. “Anwen, you are dismissed to see to your chores.”

“I am not finished speaking with her,” Flora said. “I wish to ask her about the ghost or since you were present at the time of the incident perhaps you can tell me about it.”

Torin dismissed Anwen with a wave and the woman eagerly hurried out of the room. He went to his wife, stopping in front of her. “I ordered you not to speak to the woman involved in the incident.”

“You also failed to tell me that the woman was in your bedchamber with you at the time,” Flora said and hurried to continue before her husband could command her silence. “Not that it matters since we were not wed at the time, but I must ask... will you be a faithful husband? Or will you be a husband who is not satisfied with one woman and one not faithful to your vows?”

Torin hesitated, thinking about his da who had his fair share of women while wed, though his mum did not seem to mind. He had come to the conclusion that once his mum had produced a male heir for her husband that she had done what was expected of her and she and his father were never intimate again. He could not blame her since his father could be a cruel man.

“You need to think on it?” Flora asked when his response was not forthcoming. “Your hesitation is answer enough.”

Torin wondered over his hesitation. Had he no answer? Had he needed to ponder it? Was he more like his da than he wanted to believe?

Flora continued, concerned he had yet to respond. “I know only of marriage of what I have seen of it between my mum and da. They were a loving couple and though I had no thought to wed, if I decided to do so one day, then I wished to have a marriage based on love, a loving and faithful marriage, not one based on lust. I believe until we determine what our marriage shall be, we should wait to consummate our vows, leaving either of us to walk away from our hasty marriage if necessary.”

Strange that she should feel an uneasiness in the pit of her stomach almost as if she was disturbed by the thought of their marriage ending. After all, it had barely begun. Why should it bother her? She scarcely knew her husband, though the little she did know she believed him a good man and a strong one, someone who already demonstrated that he would not hesitate to protect her.

Torin’s hand snapped out to take hold of the back of his wife’s neck, not roughly but firmly. “Listen well, wife. We are

wed and we will remain wed. I have no desire to begin another search for a wife. As far as being faithful? Give me no reason to be so.”

Flora yanked her neck free of his grasp, though she was not fool enough to believe she had had the strength to do so. He had released her when she pulled away.

“And will you do the same... give me no reason to be unfaithful to you?” she challenged.

“I will not tolerate an unfaithful wife,” he warned, his face tight with annoyance.

Flora gave a defiant lift of her chin. “And I will not tolerate an unfaithful husband.”

“You will tolerate whatever I demand of you,” he ordered, growing more annoyed that she dared to make demands.

“Not likely,” she said, “now kindly take your leave, I have duties to see to.”

“Your duty is to me first and foremost. I come before all others and you do not command me,” he warned, anger in his powerful voice.

“I do not take well to command either,” she argued, an unfamiliar anger churning in her as she fully realized the freedom that had been lost to her with this marriage.

“You will learn,” he said as if declaring it so.

Flora could not hold her tongue. “I doubt it.”

“I do not, and you will start by curbing your tongue,” he ordered.

“An unlikely possibility since so much can be learned and matters settled through civilized discussion.”

“Are you suggesting I am not civilized?” Torin snapped again, finding it difficult to temper his annoyance.

As was her way, Flora spoke her mind. “When you make foolish demands as you seem to so often do, it would appear so.”

Torin's arm shot out to snag his wife around her waist and yank her against him. "Be careful, wife, for I may show you just how uncivilized I can be."

Voices were heard as the door creaked open.

Before Torin stepped away from his wife, he whispered, "We will discuss the consummation of our vows later."

The servants who entered stopped when they caught sight of the heavy scowl on Lord Torin's face.

"You will follow my wife's orders in the keep, but if you have any issues with anything Lady Flora demands of you, you will seek me out immediately and I will see it settled," he commanded and strode out of the room.

Her husband made sure to leave her with a reminder that his word was final and that her word mattered little in any and all decisions. She lost all desire to see the keep brought back to life and the ghost dispatched. Why bother when she would need to seek approval for everything she did or know that if a servant disagreed with her that it could be immediately disputed?

She was about to dismiss the small group, using the long journey here as an excuse to her sudden fatigue and that the chores could wait for another day, but held her tongue. Her parents would be disappointed in her if she simply surrendered to her fate instead of seizing upon it, learning from it, and gaining the knowledge she needed to make a good life for herself regardless of the circumstances that fate had forced upon her.

Flora smiled and was about to issue orders when an agonizing roar echoed through the Great Hall followed by a rush of frigid wind that shivered everyone there.

Every servant paled, ran, dropping brooms and buckets as they tripped over each other while fleeing the room as fast as they could.

Not so Flora... she remained where she was.

CHAPTER 6



Flora paid the retreating servants no heed. She glanced around the room waiting to see if anything materialized while hugging herself against the cold that swirled through the room. She turned swiftly when she heard a strange noise and found the shutter that had been broken was in worse shape than before, almost ready to break free of its hinge.

Curious, she pulled a bench tucked under the closest trestle table over to place beneath the window. Seeing it would not give her enough height to reach the window, she pulled another bench over and with effort she got it balanced on top of the first one. She then moved a small stool over to the two benches so she could get herself up on the benches without difficulty. Still, though, the benches swayed a bit once she climbed atop them. She kept to the center of the bench, knowing if she weighted too heavily on one side, the two would topple.

The broken shutter trembled against the stone wall and Flora smiled, feeling the rush of air that shot through the window being the cause of it. She then did her best to examine the window, a theory beginning to form in her head.

* * *

TORIN HAD ALMOST REACHED the practice field with Kinnell, his friend having waited for him, curious as to what had gone

on in the keep. Kinnell had laughed when Torin had finished explaining to him.

“Well, you always did love a challenge and it appears Lady Flora is definitely going to be that.”

“Quiet and obedient, that was all I wanted in a wife,” Torin argued. “We are home not even a day, and she creates havoc.”

“You will never be bored with her as a wife,” Kinnell said with more laughter.

Torin shook his head. “You are no help, but you soon will be when you face my frustration on the practice field.”

“THE GHOST! THE GHOST!”

Torin and Kinnell turned at the chorus of screams and ran toward the people they spotted running away from the keep.

As Torin reached two of them, he halted them with a command. “Tell me what happened.”

The woman shivered badly and shook her head, leaving the man to speak. “The giant made himself know. He roared at us and sent his mighty breath spewing throughout the Great Hall.”

“Where is Lady Flora?” Torin demanded.

They both shook their heads.

“Did she rush out with you?” Torin demanded harshly and with a bit of anxiousness, and they both shook their heads. “No one saw to her safety?”

The man and woman shook their heads again, then lowered them, avoiding Lord Torin’s angry glare.

Torin rushed to the keep, Kinnell right behind him. He sped up the stairs, fear for his wife’s safety squeezing his chest, and burst into the Great Hall, yelling out, “FLORA!”

His sudden scream startled Flora and she lost her balance on top of the benches and as the one bench tumbled out from beneath her, she cried out, “Torin!”

Torin raced to her and caught her around the waist to swing her away from the falling bench and out of danger.

His heart beat madly in his chest, having feared he would not reach her in time when she had screamed out his name. Fearful of what she might get into if he let her go, he kept his arm firm around her waist.

“Bloody hell, woman, what were you doing on top of those benches?” he demanded.

“Investigating,” she said as if it was obvious, keeping her hand on his arm, a bit shaky from her near fall.

“Why did you not run with the others when the giant made himself known?” he asked and grew annoyed that his thought was to kiss her, grateful she had not been harmed. What was it about this woman he found so appealing when she had caused him nothing but problems since arriving home?

“It was no giant, no ghost, nothing more than the wind whipping through the Great Hall,” Flora said and pointed to the window. “It is why the shutter broke. The wind tore at it and no doubt served to make the sound appear more like an anguished howl than a simple shot of cold wind.”

Kinnell righted one bench and climbed up on it easily reaching the broken window shutter to examine it. “She could be right about that.”

“It would explain today’s ghostly roar and worth consideration as I continue to investigate,” Flora said.

Kinnell yanked the broken shutter free and smiled. “I will go see this gets repaired.”

“That would be wonderful,” Flora said. “There are other shutters that require repairs as well, but I do not think anyone will return to the keep today. The rest can wait until tomorrow.”

Kinnell chuckled beneath his breath as he left the pair.

“I should fetch my cloak,” Flora said, her husband’s arm still around her waist and her hand still resting upon it.

“I will go with you. Where did you leave it?” Torin dropped his arm from around her with reluctance. He liked the feel of her locked in his arm safe and sound since there was no telling what she might get into. But in his arms, he could keep her protected, keep her safe, keep her his wife.

“Your bedchamber,” she said, catching with curiosity the way his eyes had settled over her in an almost possessive way.

“*Our* bedchamber,” he corrected.

“How could it be ours when you have had other women there?” she asked as she headed to the stairs.

He was struck by the way she did not accuse, but instead simply stated a fact, a fact she attempted to make sense of, and he did not know how to respond to her and yet he did, his unexpected words shocking him.

“Would you prefer to choose another bedchamber for us?”

Flora stopped abruptly and turned to him. “I believe that would suit me much better. I can sleep there, and you can remain in your bedchamber until we decide what to do about consummating our vows.”

He took hold of her chin. “You are my wife, and we will not now nor ever sleep in separate beds.”

“I learned that noble husband and wives have separate bedchambers. That is not a practice in the Highlands?” she asked and went right on talking. “My mum and da always shared a bedchamber. I do not recall them ever not sleeping together.”

“My parents did not share a bedchamber. My da had his and my mum had hers. After she gave birth to me, they never slept together again,” he said as they proceeded up the stairs and Torin wondered why he had shared that bit of information about himself with her. How was it that he talked so easily with her when he never did so with any woman?

“They did not love each other?” Flora asked, a sadness creeping in her heart for him. If his da and mum did not love each other, how could their son know and learn what love was like between a husband and wife?

“Nay, there was no love between them,” he said and realized it was the first time he had ever spoken aloud what he knew to be true. In a strange way, he felt relieved to have openly admitted it.

“How very sad for them and for you,” Flora said and felt her husband take hold of her hand as they reached the floor of his bedchamber.

“It is dark, you need to be careful. I will not see you harmed.”

She smiled and leaned against him to say, “You have kept me safe twice now. You are a good husband.”

“And yet you do not obey me,” he scolded though lightly as he entered his bedchamber, tugging her along. He halted once inside, bringing her to a halt as well. “What did you mean by how sad for me that my parents did not love each other?”

She eagerly explained. “How could you learn what love is between a husband and wife if you never got to see it? You only saw indifference between your parents and most likely obedience from your mum since it is something you demand from me. And you certainly never experienced love with the women you have coupled with. Anwen remarked about love being rare and that lust is what most people share and once gone there is nothing left. She is wiser than she knows but then she was lucky to have found love and understands its importance.”

“Every day is a struggle to survive in the Highlands. There is no time to think on such nonsensical things. A wife is needed for many reasons, love being the least of them. “Give me what I need, and I will give you what you need, a husband who can keep you safe and protected.”

Flora went and fetched her cloak from where she had left it, slipped it over her shoulders and shivered with relief, the bedchamber colder than when she last left it. She returned to Torin and tapped at his chest a few times, the strength of his muscles beneath sending a strange yet pleasant sensation through her.

“You, my husband, are in need of love,” she said and walked out of the room.

Torin shook his head and hurried after her to precede her down the dark stairwell to keep her safe and he could not help but wonder how it would feel to fall in love with his wife.

* * *

“HAVE you run out of breath to talk, wife?” Torin teased when she barely said a few words to him after supper.

She laughed softly. “Never will that happen. Exhaustion has caught up with me from the journey here. I feel as if I could sleep an entire day but with so much to be accomplished in the keep tomorrow, I believe I should seek my bed early. There is, however, the consummation of our vows to consider. Your kiss made me more than curious about coupling, but I honestly believe we owe it to each other to make sure this marriage is what we want. It will not hurt us to wait a month or more to make certain.”

He laughed hardily. “There is no way I will wait a month or more to bed you. I will give you a week, no more, to adapt to me and your new home. After that, our vows get sealed, and we forever remain husband and wife.”

“A week seems hardly sufficient for such a serious commitment.”

“I will not bargain with you on this, wife. I will give you a week since by then your endless questions and curiosity will have you knowing all you need to know about what awaits you as my wife and life here in the Highlands.”

Flora stood with a stretch. “I accept, husband, and I am pleased that you will be tolerant of all my endless questions and respond without hesitation or annoyance.”

Torin’s smile faded. “When did I agree to that?”

“When you said that my endless questions and curiosity will have me knowing all I need to know, which means you

will willingly answer any and all questions I ask of you.” She yawned as she stretched her shoulders back.

“You use my words against me,” he argued.

“Did you not speak the truth?”

“Of course, I did,” he said. “I have no reason to lie to you.”

“There then you admit it and I am pleased to know you will be truthful with me since I will always be truthful with you even when you may not like what I say.”

“That, my dear wife, is probably going to be more often than I would like.”

“At least it will not be unexpected, husband.” Flora smiled and went and sat on the bed. “Where will you sleep tonight?”

It was Torin’s turn to smile. “Beside you.” Her shock actually kept her from responding and he went on to explain. “I told you that from this point on we would always share a bed. That does not mean I will always bed you.”

“What if I want you to?”

Of course, his shaft sprang to attention at that.

“I will do my best to make it so,” he said.

“And if I do not care for coupling?” she asked.

His shaft withered in disappointment as did he. “I want bairns at least four of them, lie with me when necessary and I will not bother you otherwise.”

“Will you seek out other women then?”

“Men have needs, Flora, as do women, but if you’re a woman who does not like coupling, I will not force it on you. But that does not mean I will not fulfill my needs.”

Flora tapped her chin. “This is all remarkably interesting, and I am looking forward to seeing how it turns out. I must admit though, I do not like the thought of you bedding other women. You are my husband, and I should be able to please you. You will allow me time to learn and not mind tutoring me if needed?”

His shaft came back to life. “Aye, I will do that. I told you earlier I will teach you all you need to know.”

“I do appreciate that, and you should know I am a fast learner.” She yawned again.

He hoped not too fast since it would be enjoyable teaching her. “You are tired. Sleep.” He stood and went to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to check on a few things before I retire,” he said and hurried out before she could question him anymore.

He took a deep breath and let the night’s frigid air wash over him and cool him down. Her innocent inquiry had turned him hard, and he could not climb in bed with her and have her feel his hard shaft poking her, and she would with the bed so narrow. She would ask him endless questions and no doubt turn him even harder, then what would he do? Suffer a painful night.

Why in bloody hell had he agreed to a week?

But what if she was right? What if they weren’t suited for each other? She did talk far too much and was far too curious. Did he want to deal with that every day? He did find her appealing, but it had been weeks since he last coupled, having found a willing woman when he was at Lord Bhric’s clan.

He thought of what Anwen’s words to his wife about lust and once that was gone nothing was left. Anwen was right. Once lust was satisfied, what need did a man and woman have for each other?

He shook his head. What was he doing asking himself endless questions? He needed a wife and he got himself one. Lust, love, whatever, they were wed and would learn to live with each other just as endless couples did.

His wife could have her week, after that he would satisfy both their lust.

CHAPTER 7



S now scrunched beneath Torin's boots as he walked through the village with Kinnell. A fair share had fallen last night, but not enough to keep people from their tasks.

"See that Philip is supplied with sufficient peat for his hearth when the men are done with repairing his roof, along with all the elderly folk," Torin ordered, spotting two men working on the thatching.

"Already being seen to, my lord," Kinnell said.

"Are the food sheds stocked? Winter will grow worse soon enough and I want no shortage of food for the clan."

"One is low. I have sent a hunting party out early this morning," Kinnell said. "The oat and barely harvest was exceptional this year and will provide well for the clan, and Verena assures me there is an abundance of dried and pickled vegetables. The clan will do well this winter."

Torin stopped and cast a quick glance around, making certain no one was close enough to hear what he would say. "We need to find out if we were randomly attacked or marked for attack, though I fear it was not random. Yet, I see no reason for it. Clan Norham is in good favor with the nearby clans. We have helped many times defend them against enemies. Besides, there has been no unrest between the local clans lately."

"That could be the problem. The clan leaders have no need of renegades, and they are desperate to take what they can,"

Kinnell said.

“There is always a need for those who can carry out secret deeds whether small or large. One never knows what nobles are plotting whether to add to their wealth or rid themselves of an annoying or demanding relative or seek to overthrow a ruler. If the attack was not random, it would mean someone wants us harmed. The question is... why?”

“Smyth and Elden know well the renegades, having been part of them. I will send them to see what they can find out.”

“They are not young men anymore and with winter settling in even a brief journey would be harsh on them. I will not see them harmed. Choose two strong warriors and have them talk with the two men and learn what they can about the renegades, then send them.”

“Aye, my lord,” Kinnell said.

Heavy coughing caught both their attention and Kinnell smiled seeing two women, brooms in hand, beating tapestries that had been draped over low hanging tree branches of a tall pine growing close to the keep.

“It appears you will be returning to live in the keep soon, though tongues are predicting that it will not be for long,” Kinnell said with his usual teasing grin.

“My wife not only talks far too much, but she is also tenacious when she sets her mind to something.” Torin shook his head. “How I did not see her true nature troubles me.”

Kinnell was quick to give his opinion. “Her beauty robbed you of your senses.”

Torin went to argue and stopped, the memory of the first time he had seen Flora flashing in his mind. He had been struck by her beauty and the way her dark hair fell in soft waves over her shoulders. Her long dark eyelashes framed her dark eyes perfectly and her soft pink lips invited. It was only after the full scope of her beauty had hit him, did he notice the softness of her voice, a voice that had been healing and a fact that had never been revealed to him.

“Bloody hell, you’re right,” Torin admitted, annoyed at himself for not finding out more about his wife before he wed her.

“At least your eyes will have a feast to enjoy each day.”

“That is little compensation for my ears that will go numb with her endless chatter,” Torin complained.

“My lord,” someone called out and Torin turned. “A merchant with some news you should hear right away.”

Torin gave a glance to the keep intending to find out what his wife was up to as soon as he finished with the merchant.

* * *

FLORA GLANCED around the Great Hall, pleased with the results thus far. The hearth had been cleaned of its old ashes and now blazed brightly. Tables and benches had been scrubbed as well as the wood floor. The mantle was lined with fresh cut pine branches, the scent permeating the room. The broken shutters had been repaired and installed. Dust was being beaten out of the tapestries and torches, snug in their metal brackets, lit along the walls as well as the numerous candles throughout the room. The table that sat upon the dais was now draped in a clean white cloth. The room once again shined.

Satisfied with the way the room looked, Flora waved Anwen over to her. “Follow me,” she said when the woman reached her. “Where does this door lead to?” she asked, stopping in front of the locked door in the dark passageway she had come upon her first time here. Though, the passageway was dark no more, torches lighting the length of it.

“It goes to the kitchen, my lady,” Anwen said.

Flora stepped back into the Great Hall. “Someone fetch Verena for me.” She returned to Anwen waiting in the passageway. “What is along here?”

“Lord Torin’s solar is a short distance down.”

Flora made her way down to the door glad she had all torches lit in the keep so everyone could see where they walked. She entered the room. It was smaller than she thought it would be with chairs and small tables filling most of the space.

She swiped her hand along one of the tables, a wad of dust coating it. “Has this room been closed off longer than the other ones?”

“Aye, my lady. “Lord Torin pays little heed to it,” Anwen said.

“I want it dusted, cleaned, and all the furnishings removed,” Flora ordered.

Nervously, Anwen asked, “Should I not get Lord Torin’s permission first?”

“I would prefer you didn’t since I wish to surprise him with changes more suited to him, but if you feel you must I will not stop you.”

“I will wait, my lady,” Anwen said, admiration growing for the woman.

“You handle the orders I give you well. I believe you would be perfect to oversee the keep’s servants,” Flora said. “We will speak more about your new position later. There is much yet to be seen to. Join me in Lord Torin’s bedchamber after you appoint a crew to the solar.”

Verena entered the Great Hall as Flora returned to the room. “You wished to see me, my lady?”

“Aye, Verena. Please see that the entrance door from the kitchen to the keep is unlocked,” Flora instructed.

“Lord Torin ordered it locked,” Verena hurried to say.

With the way Verena’s voice trembled and how she wrung her hands, the woman was obviously upset. Flora was not sure if it was fear of the ghost or fear of Torin that caused it. Either way she did not want to upset the woman who had been extremely cooperative with her.

“I will leave it to Lord Torin then and will let you know his decision,” Flora said.

Verena bobbed her head. “Thank you, my lady. Can I get anything for you? A hot brew perhaps?”

“Not at the moment, but thank you, Verena,” Flora said.

“You do not have to thank me, my lady,” Verena reminded.

“It is my way. I am afraid you will have to get used to it,” Flora said with a smile.

“You are very thoughtful, my lady. It will be a pleasure to serve you.”

Flora spoke with a few other servants before she climbed the curved stairway, lit braziers lighting the way. She entered her husband’s bedchamber and gave thought to what she would do with the room. Though, if no other room suited them, she might not have a choice but to keep this as their bedchamber.

She had yet to order work done up here, concentrating on readying the Great Hall. She was aware that the servants were reluctant to work in this area due to the last ghost incident that drove everyone from the keep and forced Torin to close it. She, herself, hoped for a visit from the ghost but that would mean the servants would be only more reluctant to come here. She stared at the space, various ideas running around in her head as to what to do with it.

A thought hit her, and she grew excited. Would it be possible? Would her husband object? It was his bedchamber. She could make no changes without his approval.

“My lady,” Anwen said.

Flora turned, and excitement gleamed in her eyes. “What other bedchamber would be suitable for me and my husband?”

Anwen appeared perplexed but answered, “Lady Amelia’s bedchamber might do.”

Anwen took Flora up another flight of curving stairs and entered a room. It was not as big as Torin’s bedchamber, and the bed was smaller, but it was sizeable enough to fit Torin’s

bed. The hearth was a decent size and there was room for a small table and a chair or two. Several chests also occupied the dusty room.

“Do you know what the chests contain?” Flora asked.

“Blankets and bedding that probably need cleaning,” Anwen said.

“What was she like?”

Anwen hesitated.

“She was a good woman, but distant,” Torin said.

Both women turned to see him standing in the doorway.

Flora wanted to know more and wisely dismissed Anwen. “Set the servants to cleaning Lord Torin’s chambers.” Once Anwen left, she said, “Tell me about your mum.”

Torin glanced around and from the look in his eyes it seemed to Flora that he was seeing the room for the first time.

“My mum traveled mostly to see her sister, though after she passed my mum traveled no more. She would walk alone in the woods often.” He stopped recalling the time he asked to join her, and she refused his request. He asked twice more after that and was denied both times, he asked no more. “She kept mostly to herself.”

Flora’s heart grew heavy for him. She could not imagine such a distant mum. She and her mum had spent much time together along with her da. Their deaths had devastated her. She had feared she would never be able to continue without them. It took time for her to realize that they would be sorely disappointed in her if she failed to carry on with her life and make the most of what she could of it. Like now, solving this mystery and bringing the keep back to life. She intended to be completely involved with her children as her parents had been with her.

“I will smother my children in hugs and kisses and talk endlessly with them,” she said smiling broadly.

Torin loved when she smiled. It wasn’t only her beauty that captivated him, but her enthusiasm when she spoke. One

could not help but be drawn into it.

“Would it trouble you to reside in this bedchamber?” Flora asked. “I believe it might suit us well. It is a good size, more snug than large and your bed should fit here nicely.”

“If you prefer this bedchamber, I have no problem with it.” He truly didn’t and he preferred snug quarters that way he could keep her close. He would not have to close a long distance between them when he watched her disrobe, or when he scooped her up to carry her naked to their bed, and the room would stay warm for when he bent her naked over the edge of the bed and... he shook his head, forcing himself to ignore the delightfully wicked images invading his head. “Have it made ready no later than the end of the week.”

“You wish us to seal our vows here?” she asked.

“What better place for us to show all that we are not afraid of the ghost.”

“I cannot disagree with you on that, but how can you be so sure you will wish to keep me as your wife,” she asked.

“I told you there is no debate on that. You are my wife and will remain so. I but give you time to adjust.”

Flora scrunched her brow, wondering if she had decided the same since her thoughts, she had for her husband’s old room, suggested permanence.

Torin ran his thumb over the wrinkles between her eyes. “What troubles you?”

He touched her with such ease, an intimacy of sorts, and she was reminded of how her da would reach out and tuck stray strands of her mum’s hair behind her ear or stroke her cheek with the back of his hand or rest his cheek to hers to whisper in her ear causing her mum to smile. To Flora those were touches of love and yet her husband showed signs of doing the same. Did he have feelings for her? Or was he trying to find his way with her?

She certainly could not deny that she liked his touch, perhaps he would make her a good husband after all. She was not foolish enough to think she had other options so why had

she suggested they wait when she knew there was nothing left for her but marriage to him?

A choice.

She wanted it to be her choice, not something forced on her. But that, unfortunately, was something she would never have.

“Tell me,” Flora,” he said gently when to his surprise she had lingered in silence.

She spoke honestly to him. “My thought was similar that this marriage was permanent, my use of your room making me see that.”

“Our marriage is permanent, and I will remind you of that again and again, if necessary, but what use can my old bedchamber be to you that would make you think that?”

“I want a room similar to my da’s study where he would go to record his findings, keep samples of various things of interest or things he felt might prove useful. A place that will help me not only learn about the Highlands but understand the area as well.”

“You have the keep to see to,” he reminded, though seeing how excited she was at the possibility he wanted to grant her request, but he held his tongue. He would not jump into any decision that concerned his wife.

“I have appointed Anwen to oversee the keep’s servants which will be a significant help and once I have the keep running properly it should not take much of my time. Besides, my thirst for knowledge will never leave me and the room will prove a great reprieve for you.”

“How so is that, wife?” he asked, captivated by her playful smile.

“While I am kept occupied in the room, you will be free of my endless questions and thoughts.”

“Now that is an excellent reason,” Torin said, his own smile teasing yet the idea that she would be shut away from

him actually disturbed him. “But what happens when bairns come along? They will need your attention, your love.”

“And my knowledge,” she added. “They will spend time with me in the room learning in between our walks in the woods where by then I hope to have gained knowledge of the indigenous trees, plants, fungus, animals, and whatever else there is for me to learn about. Of course, you will be with us and can teach the children what you know. And there is much you will be able to teach them that I cannot. I cannot fish, nor do I know how to handle a weapon, and I do not know how to swim. Do you? I believe it would be important living in the middle of a loch.”

“I know how to swim, and I can teach you in the summer if you would like, to fish as well,” he offered, though why he could not fathom. She no doubt would ask him endless questions, he would have no peace and yet... he looked forward to it.

Flora reached out and hugged her husband’s arm, her voice full of excitement. “That would be wonderful. I would love to learn how to do both.”

“I will also teach you how to defend yourself in case you should ever find yourself in a situation that leaves you no choice. That way you will stay safe until I have time to reach you,” he said, the thought sparking anger in him. He would never want to see his wife in such a dangerous situation, but he was not foolish enough to believe it would never happen and he wanted her prepared.

“I would like that as well,” she said.

He chuckled. “Of course, your incessant questions might be weapon enough to keep you from harm, a foe preferring to let you go than listen to you talk endlessly.”

“All the more reason to allow me to have your bedchamber as a place I can retreat to so that you do not have to suffer my constant chatter,” Flora said.

His wife’s quick wit continued to amaze him, turning his teasing into something beneficial for herself. What she

suggested was a solution for them both and yet he hesitated. Why? This was one time a decision concerning his wife should be easy.

“You may have the room... for now,” he granted.

“For now?” she asked with a tilt of her head while still holding on to his arm.

“We will see how it works, how things go in the keep.”

“Oh, you mean the ghost.” She released his arm to wave her hand in the air. “I will dismiss him soon enough.” Then she did something unexpected, more instinctive, that surprised her and her husband. She kissed his cheek quick and said, “Thank you, husband, I am grateful.”

Torin stared at her for a brief second before his hand shot to the back of her neck, gripped it firm, and yanked her to him for more than a peck on the cheek.

The shock of his unexpected action froze Flora for a moment, but only a moment, since his kiss tempted far too much to ignore it. It was a commanding kiss and she responded in kind. She had never given much thought to a kiss but now having experienced it she found it something she enjoyed—very much.

Aroused to the point of discomfort, Torin had to tear his mouth away from hers with earnest effort. “By the end of the week, wife, no later.”

He turned and left the room to Flora’s dismay, and she thought that she just might see the bedchamber made ready sooner.

CHAPTER 8



Something was afoot, Flora could sense it. She had seen little of her husband the last couple of days and at first, she thought it was on purpose since their kiss had certainly stirred something in them both. But on closer observation she saw that her husband seemed preoccupied with something. She had asked him twice if something troubled him, but he had dismissed her inquiry with a placating response.

“Nothing for you to worry about.”

To Flora, which meant something did trouble him, but he was not about to share it. It only served to make her more curious, so naturally she had to investigate and find out for herself. The one person who had proved to be helpful and informative was Anwen. She had taken well to her position in the keep, the servants trusting and respecting her. And with no ghostly interference since the breath of wind that had frightened those present at the time, no one protested their chores in the keep.

All was going well, Anwen presently helping Flora in the bedchamber she and Torin would share. The windows had remained open for one day to rid it of the musty odor. Today all the furnishings would be removed, the floor swept, and the ashes cleaned out of the hearth.

“Lord Torin’s bed will be moved here, Anwen, and see that a new mattress is stuffed and made ready for it and the bedding washed and the blankets aired well.”

“Aye, my lady,” Anwen said.

“You provide me with much of what I need to know about the keep and the clan itself and I deeply appreciate it. Tell me if I am wrong, but I sense something amiss in the village.”

Anwen was quick to shake her head. “Not the village, my lady, or on the isle.”

“Then what?”

“Two men were found killed in the woods not far from the bridge. A merchant who stops here often found them and alerted Lord Torin to their location.”

“Is the merchant still here?” Flora asked, eager to speak with the man.

“Aye, my lady. Hadwin sometimes winters here, the snow making travel difficult. He always stocks up on favorite items of the clan. He brings wine, spices, cloth, furs. He even had a scroll with him once.”

“Scroll?” Flora repeated, excited at the prospect that there might be something for her to read. “Did Lord Torin purchase it?”

“Nay, my lady, none here can read.”

“Do you know if the merchant still has the scroll?” Flora asked anxiously, giving her a good reason to seek out the merchant, not only to find out about the two dead men but also about the scroll.

“I do not know, my lady.”

“Where can I find him?”

“Do you know your way through the village, my lady?”

Flora shook her head, annoyed that she had yet taken the time to explore the village. She had been too occupied with the keep. What was it her da had told her? Always make certain you know the lay of the land around you. You never know when you may need to leave the area in haste.

“Can you take me there, Anwen?” Flora asked.

“Now, my lady?”

“Aye. I am anxious to see if the merchant still possesses the scroll,” Flora said, making haste to the door.

Anwen trailed behind Flora as she rushed down the stairs. Flora hurriedly grabbed her cloak she had tossed on a bench earlier. Anwen scooped up her cloak and hurried instructions to a couple of servants about what needed to be done in his lordship’s bedchamber, then raced after Flora. Once outside, the frigid wind whipping at them and biting at their cheeks, Flora hurried her hood up over her head and followed alongside Anwen.

“Hadwin’s cottage is not far from Verena’s,” Anwen said and pointed to a cottage, a covered cart sitting alongside it. “There.”

Flora was eager to question him about the two murdered men in the woods but even more eager to see if he still had the scroll. She went straight to the cart, pulling back the covering that kept the elements off his ware.

She rummaged through the packed cart, appalled that the scroll could be among the mess. The man had no idea of the treasure he possessed. Not able to dig deep enough, she hoisted herself up on the wheel of the cart and leaned over, her rump raised up in the air as she foraged through the abundance of items.

“Stop! Stop! What are you doing?” a voice called out.

Flora paid the anxious voice no mind, though she did hear Anwen warn the man that he was speaking to Lord Torin’s wife. His tone changed, begging her to let him find whatever she was searching for.

Flora continued to pay him no heed. She was too excited to discover it for herself, and she did. Her hand touched a leather pouch and by the size of it knew it contained the scroll. She excitedly leaned further down to grasp hold of it.

She felt herself slip but did not care, her discovery more important.

However, she let out a gasp when someone grabbed her firmly by the backside to prevent her from toppling headfirst

into the cart. Only one person would dare do that.

“Hold firm, husband!” Flora called out, “I almost have hold of it.”

She barely had time to grasp the scroll in her hand before she was yanked out of the cart.

“What the bloody hell are you doing, wife?” Torin demanded once he had set her on her feet in front of him.

“A scroll!” Flora said, holding it up victoriously.

Torin glared at his wife, her dark hair in disarray and a smudge of dirt on her cheek. How she could be more appealing so disheveled puzzled him, but damn if she did not stir his loins.

“You do not go digging in Hadwin’s cart,” Torin scolded.

“I would have fetched whatever my lady wanted, my lord,” Hadwin said with a worrisome voice.

“It was not his fault,” Flora said with a wave of her hand. “I simply could not wait. I had to see if he had a scroll. I have not laid my eyes on one in far too long.” She suddenly thought of why else she wished to see him. “Tell me of the bodies you discovered.”

Hadwin was taken aback by her question and looked quickly to Torin.

“They do not concern you,” Torin warned and brushed the smudge of dirt off her cheek.

Flora went to protest but Torin’s finger pressed firmly to her lips stopped her.

“Not another word,” Torin cautioned and taking firm hold of her arm forced her to keep step with him.

“We must pay him for the scroll. I wish to keep it,” Flora said.

“A gift to the new bride,” Hadwin called out.

“How thoughtful. Thank you!” Flora called back. “We must talk. I wish to know where you got it.”

She got no reply and she realized why. Her husband's handsome face wore an angry scowl and people hurried out of his path, keeping their distance. She kept silent as he hurried her along right to the cottage they were presently sharing, though she spent more time there than he did.

"Why didn't you tell me about the two men murdered just past the bridge?" she asked once he shut the door and released her arm.

He ignored her question. "You are my wife and are to behave in a certain manner. Bent over a cart with your rump up in the air is not how I wish to find you."

Except if you're bent over the bed naked.

The thought had Torin shaking his head and silently spewing oaths. He was no randy young lad. He was a man in control of his thoughts and deeds and yet when with his wife he fought to control both. At the moment, he wished he was not a man of his word since he would like nothing better than to... he shook his head again.

"I do not understand why you would keep such news from me," Flora protested.

With great willpower that would surely be lacking by week's end, he took control of his wandering thoughts. "You need not know."

"Why not? This is my home and I want to know all that goes on in my home. How can I help you if you keep things from me?" she argued and struck by a sudden thought, she placed the scroll on the table and went to her husband to rest a gentle hand on his arm. "I should have realized it."

Her lovely face always seemed to captivate him, hold him prisoner, especially her dark eyes, so wide and expressive. They invited him to look deeper and once he did, they tempted and if he gazed on them too long, he knew he would be lost.

He nearly shook his head again but stopped. "Realize what?"

"Your mum and da led separate lives. Your mum never helped your da, so you do not expect such help from your

wife, whereas my da always sought my mum's counsel. They would share opinions and thoughts and work problems out together. I would much prefer that kind of sharing marriage to a secret one. So, these two men found in the woods, were they found together or separate?"

"Together," he answered without thinking.

"Were they known to you?"

"Nay. They were not at all familiar."

"Could you tell if they had been attacked or could they have possibly fought and killed each other?" Flora asked, her mind tossing possibilities around as she spoke. "The wounds on the bodies might help determine that. Let me have a look —"

"Absolutely not!" Torin said, her absurd suggestion drawing him out of what felt like a daze to him. His wife had a way of drawing him into a conversation to discuss things he never intended to discuss with her. Though, he could not help but think she was right about why he did not discuss things with her. He had never seen his parents discuss anything. His da's word ruled and that was that. There was no opinion but his and at times it had annoyed Torin. His da would hear no other proposal. It was his way and his way alone. And there were times his decisions had proven wrong.

"But I may see something you missed," Flora continued to argue.

"You are not going to look on two dead bodies," Torin commanded.

"Why not?" she asked.

Torin snapped at her. "Because I said so."

"That makes no sense," she said and shook her head disregarding it as nonsense.

"Need I remind you that my word rules here."

Her response was quick and blunt. "Then it should rule wisely."

Torin glared at her. “Are you telling me I am not wise?”

Again, Flora lost no time in responding to him. “In this situation, aye, I am, and you are stubborn as well.”

“Watch your words with me, wife?” Torin warned.

“Why? You are my husband, I should be able to say anything to you without fear or worry.”

“And you should obey my word, then you would have no fear or worry.”

“You want a servant that blindly obeys, not a wife.”

“I want an obedient wife,” Torin argued.

Flora poked him in the chest as she spoke. “And I want a husband who trusts and respects my opinions and thoughts enough to share everything with me.”

Torin grabbed her poking finger and went to argue, then stopped. How many times had he had a similar argument with his da? How many times had his da refused to listen to his son’s opinion? How often had his da believed himself right above all others and was proven wrong? All because he refused to consider another person’s opinion, refused to believe he could be wrong.

“This is why I suggested we give it time to see if this marriage between us would work,” Flora said. “I am different than most women. I am eager to offer my opinion, to discuss matters whether trivial or important, to learn from my husband and he learn from me, to share things whether good or bad and to accept your word, when necessary, though not without discussion. I fear that given time you will grow annoyed and come to dislike my curious nature. Where then will that leave us? For me to spend my days closed away in a room like your mum did? I can tell you now, that is something I will not do. You tell me that we are wed, and we will stay wed, that that will not change, and I tell you that I will not change who I am. Knowing that do you still want me as a wife?”

Flora knew her speech would make little difference. She had no place to go, her life would be here on the Isle of Outerson as wife to Lord Torin. But she would have her say,

keep her voice, not remain silent, and her husband needed to know that.

“I remind you as I said I would. You are my wife and will stay my wife,” Torin said. “And you and I, wife, will find a way to make it work which means—”

“We will compromise,” Flora said with glee and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “A perfect solution and a wise choice on your part.” She slipped her finger from his grasp and took hold of his hand. “Come, we must see what the two bodies can tell us.”

Torin was out the door of the cottage before he regained his senses and tried to recall when or if he had agreed to allow her to see the bodies.

“Before we see the bodies we should speak to the merchant,” Flora said and headed that way. “Did you question Hadwin? Could he have possibly killed them, though that does not seem likely since he reported the dead men to you.”

Torin listened, though he had little choice since his wife just went on talking. But he did learn something. In his wife’s continuous talk, she often came up with her own answers and solutions. So, it would prove wise to allow her to talk at times.

It was odd but he found the way she sorted through things with constant chatter interesting. Much of what she said gave him food for thought and had him considering things he might not have considered. It was another aspect of her he found appealing. Normally, a quick glance told him if a woman appealed to him or not, which was exactly the reason he had wed Flora. Now, however, he was discovering different things about his wife that added to her appeal.

“Had they been moved?” Flora asked.

Torin cleared his head with a shake. “What?”

“The bodies of the two men, had they been moved?”

“Why would they have been moved?” Torin asked.

“I suppose for various reasons. The merchant may have taken things off their bodies to add to his ware. Or perhaps an animal dragged one away from where he had fallen... oh, that’s another thing. Had the animals gotten to them?”

She had his head spinning and he feared he would never stop shaking it around his wife.

“Let’s see what Hadwin has to say first,” he suggested.

They had taken only a few short steps when a scream erupted, bringing them to an abrupt stop. They watched as servant after servant ran out of the keep.

“The ghost! The ghost has returned!” several servants called out.

Flora let go of Torin’s hand and ran straight for the keep.

Torin shook his head and ran after her.

CHAPTER 9



Flora almost ran into Anwen as she rushed into the Great Hall. “Where?” she asked the woman anxiously.

“His lordship’s bedchamber.”

Flora rushed to the stairs and raced up them.

Torin looked to Anwen after a quick glance showed his wife was nowhere to be seen.

“Your bedchamber, my lord,” Anwen said and hastily glanced at the door.

“You can leave, Anwen,” he said, seeing the fear in her eyes and hurried to the stairs to catch up with his wife. She was nowhere on the curve of the steps, and he marveled at her speed.

He found her standing in the middle of his bedchamber gazing about. A chill swept through the room from one of the two windows whose shutters had been removed for repair. A trail of ashes went from the partially cleaned hearth to the door and furniture lay in disarray.

His wife went to the hearth, bending over low enough to look up the stone chimney. Before he could reach her, her head and shoulders disappeared up it.

“Flora!” he called out when her arms shot up also disappearing up the chimney. The woman was foolishly fearless. “Come out of there right now,” he ordered and shook his head frustrated when he got no response and was about to

bend down to cast a glance up the chimney to see what she was about when she suddenly stooped down.

Soot marred her brow and one cheek, and her usual shiny dark hair was sprinkled with it, and yet she wore a smile.

“The wind. Can’t you feel it?” She raised her hands, dusted with soot, and nodded at the floor. “The wind no doubt came barreling down the chimney, blew out soot along with the ashes as you can see by the trail along the floor and created a moaning sound.”

Torin looked along the floor and spotted patches of soot.

“Did you notice by chance if the ghost made himself known on strong windy days?” she asked.

“I do not recall,” he said, thinking she might just be right.

“We must note this windy day and see what follows with his next visit. I will explain to the servants what caused the moan and have them return to the keep, though unless I return with them, they might not trust my word, but I do not want to delay talking with Hadwin.” Her wide eyes sparkled as she resolved the issue. “I will have them take a repast until I return.”

Torin grabbed her arm when she went to walk past him. “You have soot on your face, in your hair, and on your hands. You will refresh yourself at the cottage after instructing the servants, then we will go see Hadwin.”

He did not give her a chance to argue or disagree, he hurried her out of the room and out of the keep. The servants and many clan members mulled around outside, curious and frightened.

Torin yanked his wife tight beside him when she went to speak and he called out in a commanding tone, “It was no ghost. The wind rushed down the chimney spewing the ashes and soot. “You may take a repast and when Lady Flora returns to the keep, you will as well to continue with your chores.”

Whispers and mumbles spread through the crowd but not a single protest was heard. Torin had not expected any.

Everyone knew he would never send his wife into harm's way and so they trusted his word.

Torin summoned Anwen with a shout and a wave and the woman hurried to him. He yanked off his wife's cloak and handed it to Anwen. "Fetch a fresh cloak for Lady Flora." He quickly spread his fur-lined cloak out like the wing of a large bird and wrapped her in it as he hugged her against his side.

Flora wasn't sure if it was the cold or the way he instinctively shielded her that sent a shiver through her, and she relaxed against him as they walked to the cottage. Once inside, she reluctantly stepped away from him, wondering why his small gesture of thoughtfulness had left her feeling... strange, a simmering linger that traveled deep down inside her. A feeling she wanted to explore. A feeling she enjoyed and did not want to vanish. How could she feel all that from his one simple gesture?

Torin discarded his cloak to a chair and went to the bucket of water kept by the hearth and moved it to the table. He snatched a scrap of cloth kept along with the towels that had been left for them and dropped it into the water. He concentrated on the task at hand, trying to ignore how badly he wanted to take his wife in his arms and keep her there, let his hand linger at the curve of her waist as he kept her hugged tight so that he could feel her breasts pressed against his chest.

The sudden distinct odor of soot caught at his nose and brought him out of his reverie. He rinsed the cloth and when Flora held out her hand for it, he shoved it away, took gentle hold of her chin and tenderly wiped at the smudges on her face.

"You are foolishly fearless, wife," he scolded, her dark inquisitive eyes casting their usual spell over him. A few days home and he could not get his mind off his wife. She would sneak into almost his every thought. He could not escape her. She lingered there, refusing to leave him.

It took her a moment to respond, his touch, the simple kind act of cleaning her face, leaving the pleasant simmer that lingered in her to intensify.

“Not so,” she said, fighting to concentrate, something she never had difficulty doing. She had to think a moment, her thought almost slipping away before she grabbed onto it. “I realized that you would not be far behind me and that you would keep me from harm, if necessary, just as you had during the attack traveling here.”

Torin heard not an ounce of doubt in her words. She was sure of his ability to keep her safe even from a ghost and that delighted him more than he expected.

Flora found herself far too interested in his lips, recalling how they felt when he kissed her and thinking how she would not mind if he kissed her again. The unusual thought struck some sense back into her. This was not the time to desire a kiss.

Desire.

Was it desire and not curiosity that had brought the thought to mind? Had his kiss sparked her dormant desire and left her longing for him?

Whatever was the matter with her? She had far more important things on her mind than a kiss. Why then did it refuse to leave her thoughts?

She forced herself to ask a question which disturbed her even more since questions came so naturally to her. “One thing that puzzles me is why wasn’t the sound heard earlier on, though the stones could have shifted in the chimneys over time, or the wind may have grown in intensity.”

Torin listened to his wife ask and answer her questions as he finished wiping her face clean, which he had done several minutes ago. He continued running the cloth over her face as an excuse to keep hold of her chin, so he could gaze closely on her. Her beauty could not be denied. She possessed the most flawless skin, not a mark or blemished marred it and there was a silky softness to it that he needed no touch to feel. Her dark eyebrows arched perfectly above her dark eyes and the edges of her long dark lashes had the slightest curve to them and framed her eyes beautifully. But it was her lips that captivated him the most since he had an unrelenting ache to kiss her. It

was an ache that never seemed to dissipate. It lingered in him, and he feared it might never leave him. But was that so bad? She was his wife, and he could kiss her any time he liked.

He caught a brief flare of desire spark in her eyes, surprising him since it was mostly curiosity he saw there, but not this, not curiosity. It was a flash of passion he saw. Could she truly want him to kiss her? There was only one way to find out and only one way to silence his wife's endless chatter.

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her, not a soft, simple kiss, but a hardy, meaningful one.

Flora hurried her arms around his neck, his commanding kiss leaving her a bit soft on her feet and she instinctively leaned against him. She returned his kiss with equal fervor, enjoying it and the fact that he had wanted to kiss her just as she wanted him to.

After their lips fed hungrily on each other, not coming close to satisfying the relentless thirst that Torin feared might never be quenched, he slowed their kiss reluctantly. When her arms fell away from around his neck, he cupped her face and showered her lips with light kisses.

Her eyes fluttered open, though she did not recall closing them and when his lips drifted off hers and his hands fell away from her face, she smiled. "I truly enjoy your kisses."

"And I truly enjoy kissing you," he admitted, brushing his lips over hers one last time.

She sighed with a pleasure that was new to her. "Is it permissible for me to kiss you, not a peck on the cheek, but a kiss like we just shared, and not wait for you to kiss me?"

"You have my permission to do just that any time you'd like," he said hastily. "And I do not mind pecks either."

Flora pressed her hand on his chest. "I know I have mentioned this before, but a reminder always helps. This is all very new to me, and I am eager to learn all I can."

"And I have plans to teach you," he reminded as well.

“I love gaining knowledge. I believe it feeds the mind and soul, which reminds me we must go speak with Hadwin, then I can return with the servants to the keep so they will see there is nothing to fear.” She glanced at her hand on his chest and grimaced as she moved it off him. “I got soot on you.”

“My shirt can be washed, worry not,” he said, having liked that she had not simply rested her hand upon his chest, but had pressed it firmly. His heart already had been beating strongly from their kiss, her simple touch had made it pound and he had wondered if she could feel it.

Flora hurried to wash her hands, then gave her hair a good brushing after her husband reminded her that it had been sprinkled with soot. She braided it quickly, then washed her hands again.

A knock sounded and Anwen entered after Torin gave permission and she handed a cloak to Flora. “My lady,” she said with a soft bob of her head.

“As soon as I return, we will get busy in the keep once again,” Flora said.

Flora and Torin left the cottage shortly after Anwen took her leave and headed to Hadwin’s cottage.

Hadwin could not hide his shock at seeing Lord Torin standing at his door, his wife beside him, and he stared at them wide-eyed, not knowing what to say.

“We have questions for you about the dead men you came across in the woods before arriving here, and I am beyond appreciative that you gifted me the scroll.”

The last of her remark seemed to relax him a bit. “You are most welcome, my lady.” He shook his head as if finally realizing his manners. “Please, please come in out of the cold.”

The cottage was small and neatly kept with a good fire in the hearth, keeping the sparse space toasty warm.

“Please sit,” Hadwin offered.

“We will not be staying long, Hadwin, a few questions and we will be on our way,” Torin said.

Flora was not so sure about that and seeing the way Torin's presence made Hadwin nervous, she considered that it might prove beneficial to return and speak with Hadwin without her husband.

"The two dead men you came across, had they fallen near each other?" Flora asked.

If Hadwin thought it odd that Flora asked the questions rather than Torin, he did not show it. He answered without hesitation.

"They were a short distance apart, the one man prone on the ground and the other near a tree trunk not far from him."

"What did you think when you saw them?" Flora asked.

Hadwin scratched his head. "Strange that you ask since my very first thought was that they had fought, and the one man killed the other but having been wounded himself, he stumbled to the tree where he toppled over dead. But the two also could have been attacked by a band of renegades as well. It's winter and there are those who are hungry and will do whatever is necessary for food. It is difficult to say what really happened to the two."

"They were not known to you?" Flora asked.

"Nay, my lady. They were unfamiliar to me." Hadwin offered more. "I was surprised when I came across them. This area is quiet, few travelers come this way, nothing for them here. And none would dare challenge Lord Torin. His exceptional battle skills are well-known as are his warriors."

Flora could certainly attest to that having seen him fight.

"It is a strange predicament, my lady, very strange indeed," Hadwin said, shaking his head.

"And there was nothing else that caught your eye about the scene?" Flora asked.

"To be honest, my lady, I did not linger there for fear if it was an attack the culprits might still be lingering about. I hurried off eager to cross the bridge to Outerson and inform Lord Torin of what I had found and seek safety here."

“I am glad you arrived safely, Hadwin, and thank you for speaking with me.” She stopped as she turned and looked to the man again. “I am curious. Where did you get the scroll?”

“It’s strange how I came by it. A heavy rainstorm forced me off my usual path. I found myself in a heavily forested area, a bit gloomy it was and that was where I came across a monastery. I sought shelter there and left the next morning after a hearty breakfast. It wasn’t until a few days later when I was a distance away that I discovered the scroll in my cart. No one showed interest in it and while I can read some, I cannot read Latin and the scroll is in Latin.”

“Do you recall the name of the monastery?” Torin asked.

“Nay, my lord.”

“Are you certain it was a monastery?” Torin asked.

Hadwin scratched his head again. “I assumed it was since a monk greeted me, though the place itself appeared a fortress, a high stone wall surrounding it and a solid wood door one had to pass through that was not even the entrance to the monastery itself. I was led to a long, stone building several doors running along it, private quarters for the monks I assumed. I was given one of the rooms for the night and provided with a generous amount of food.”

“Are you sure it was a monk who greeted you? Torin asked.

“He wore a dark robe,” Hadwin said as if that satisfied it.

Torin pursued with more questions. “Did he wear a wooden cross around his neck? Was the robe belted? What did he say to you?”

“I do not recall seeing a cross or a belt and I believe the monk had taken a vow of silence, since he only nodded or shook his head, and with his hood drawn up I barely saw his face. I was treated well, as one would be at a monastery. I was even given a sack of food to take with me when I left the next morning.” Hadwin shivered. “I must say though that when I glanced back after I was beyond the stone wall, I cast my eye on the monastery itself and it was a powerful and frightening

sight how wide it was and how high it rose. It resembled more a fortress than a monastery.”

“You have been helpful, Hadwin,” Torin said.

“I am glad I could help in some small way, my lord,” Hadwin said.

Torin took hold of his wife’s hand and kept a hasty pace.

“Why did you ask him about the monk and the monastery?” Flora asked, sensing something was wrong.

“I need you to tell me what that scroll says,” Torin said.

“Why?”

Torin shook his head. “Can you do anything without questioning it?”

“Nay, it is who I am, and I cannot change who I am, and I do not want to change who I am,” she said. “Now tell me why you need me to read the scroll to you.”

He remained silent until they reached the keep, then he called out to the servants gathered there waiting for Flora. “Lady Flora will be delayed.”

With no further explanation, many of the servants smiled as they walked toward the kitchen for another hot brew, thinking his lordship was making certain there would be an heir to the title soon enough.

Once inside the cottage, Torin explained. “I do not believe Hadwin stopped at a monastery.”

“Where do you believe he stopped?”

“I believe he came upon the home of the Lord Varrick, a legend in his own right, and I am concerned what might be in the scroll since there has been talk that a man with his immense skills could only come from the power of the devil.”

“Are you telling me that you believe the scroll is a pact he made with the devil?”

CHAPTER 10



Torin pointed to the scroll on the table. “Read just a small portion of it. If it points to an evil pact, stop reading it.”

“And what?” she asked, worried for Fia the woman in Clan Strathearn’s dungeon. Lord Varrick had laid claim to her and was on his way to retrieve her. What were his intentions?

“I will see it returned to Lord Varrick,” Torin said.

“Nay,” Flora protested. “Words hold great power and since it was discarded in secret then there must be a reason for it.”

“It could very well have brought harm and I will not have that harm brought here,” Torin argued.

“And what if someone discarded it for the opposite reason? What if it could help Lord Varrick?” Flora challenged again worried for Fia’s fate and if there was a chance she could help her, she would.

“We will not know until you read it.” Torin set a scowl on his wife that was meant to frighten. “You best speak the truth to me when you read it.”

Flora was taken aback by his accusation. “You insult me by suggesting I would lie to you. Have I given you reason to think I would lie and do not bother to mention when we met. I may have held a silent tongue out of illness, but no lie crossed my lips.”

“Then make sure it doesn’t now,” Torin ordered.

“I expect the same of you, husband,” she shot back.

He looked ready to argue then stopped. “Now that we have made it clear that we will not now or ever lie to each other, read the scroll and be done with it.”

Flora slipped off her cloak to drape over a chair and took hold of the scroll to slowly unravel it and read it as she did.

Torin came to stand beside her, staring at the Latin words but not able to read them. His intentions were to keep his wife safe, but if words were weapons, he had no defense against them.

“It speaks of demons and how they live on the edges of the world and how they try to work their way inward and inside us and unless we are careful, they will find a way in, and we will succumb to their evil ways. It warns of how easily evil can entrap us and how difficult it is to escape it and how in the end we will suffer the fires of hell if we allow it in.”

She paused too long, and Torin urged, “What else?”

“It warns to not suffer lightly the touch of a demon and how the offended spot must be burned or cut off and if it is too late then fire is the only recourse.”

“How does one tell if one is touched by a demon?” Torin asked.

“It tells of signs to watch for; almost inhuman skills, impervious to pain, knowledge beyond others, sleeps little, wicked thoughts, ruts like an animal, defies the cross.” Flora glanced at her husband standing silent beside her. “What has taken hold of your thoughts?”

“Why would someone place this in the merchant’s cart?” Torin asked.

“To be rid of it, for it not to be seen, for it not to be used against someone, to keep a demon from being discovered.” Flora shivered in fright. “This is not a pact with the devil. This is how to defend against him, and someone did not want another to know how to do that. This scroll is meant to help not harm. We should return it.”

“Nay, it remains here. I will not send one of mine into such danger. This is Lord Varrick’s battle. It is for him to defend.”

“How can he defend himself or others without this,” Flora asked, pointing to the scroll then gasped. “Fia! That is why he sent for Fia. Who better to fight a demon than a witch.”

“Do not even think that you can help her,” Torin said before she could suggest it. “The Highlands is a mystical place and Fia is familiar with its magic. She is far more skilled than you to deal with such mysteries.”

“I cannot disagree when you are right,” Flora said. “Fia spoke with knowledge of things I had only heard discussed but never experienced. At least she faces her fate well-armed... her weapon knowledge. We will keep the scroll safe since whoever disposed of it might seek its return.”

Torin nodded, glad his wife saw reason and did not argue the point with him.

“There is something else the scroll mentions.”

It was not like her to pause when there was something to tell him, and he quickly asked. “What is it?”

“Ghosts. It mentions ghosts.”

* * *

“MAKE sure the cleric is clean of drink,” Torin ordered, sitting at a campfire with Kinnell. “I want the keep and village blessed.”

“Aye, I will see it done, but tell me... you have a warm cottage with a wife snug in your bed and you sit here with me in the cold each night, well into the evening, since arriving home. You obviously wait for her to fall asleep before you join her, and I must ask why. She is a beauty who you should not only be enjoying but also seeing to your duty in producing an heir.”

“Worry not it will be done.”

Kinnell’s brow shot up. “So, your vows are yet to be sealed?”

“I am allowing her time to adapt to her life here.”

Kinnell laughed. “She is not adapting, she is adjusting everyone around her to her outspoken and inquisitive nature. Everyone talks about how she chatters endlessly, asks questions, and mostly answers them herself, and how kind she is to them, often requesting instead of demanding and offering her gratitude when they accomplish an assigned task. They do not know what to make of her.”

“She is a bit of a puzzle.”

“Trying to get all the pieces to fit, are you?” Kinnell said with a chuckle. “And why all of a sudden are you in a hurry to see the keep blessed when your wife seems to have discovered a reasonable explanation for the moaning and heavy-breathing ghost?”

Torin glanced around.

“Only the foolish would be sitting out in the cold tonight. No one is about and the sentinels are too far off to hear anything. Tell me what disturbs you.”

“So, you think me foolish,” Torin accused.

“Aye, seal your vows and be done with it and give yourself and the clan a good life, something your da never did,” Kinnell said, keeping his voice low just to be certain no one could hear him.

“It is not my wife that troubles me,” Torin admitted, though Kinnell’s words did ring true. He wanted to be a better man than his da and to see his clan treated well so they could all prosper.”

“What is it then?” Kinnell asked. “Has it anything to do with that scroll the merchant gifted your wife? People are curious to know what it reads.”

“Their curiosity will not be satisfied,” Torin whispered and lowered his voice even more. “Part of it talks of how ghosts are demon souls who can find no rest and how they bring their torment to the living.”

Kinnell stared at him in silence for a moment before asking, “Does it say how to get rid of them?”

“The area the ghost haunts needs to be cleansed well, then blessed by a cleric.”

“You sound doubtful that it will work.”

“I am since it also states that if the ghost is left too long in residence, it may never leave and will cause much chaos, destroying all who reside with it.” Torin shook his head. “I ignored the problem too long. I should have seen to it sooner.”

“Nonsense,” Kinnell argued. “You did not ignore it. You did what you could and even went in search of a cleric willing to travel here. And I know you well enough to know you will not surrender to the ghost.”

“You’re right, I won’t. One way or another I will see him ousted from not only the isle but the keep as well. I but worry what damage he may cause before I am able to do that.” Torin looked to the flames that flickered wildly from a sudden breath of wind.

Kinnell gave a quick glance around to see if someone or something had caused it and shivered when he saw nothing but the darkness around them.

“Your wife read it. What was her thought on it?” Kinnell asked.

“She agreed that having the cleric bless the keep was a wise decision, but she has yet to agree that a ghost actually resides in the keep.” His voice grew lower, thinking he heard someone approach. “She feels more proof is needed. Though, she says that if the ghost is not heard from after the blessing, then the problem is solved.”

Kinnell did not bother to keep his voice to a whisper. “You both seem to have it well in hand.”

“What does Lord Torin and his wife have well in hand?”

Kinnell jumped startled, not so Torin.

“You need to listen more closely, Kinnell,” Iona scolded. “I frightened you but not so Lord Torin. He heard my footfalls.”

“You tread far too softly,” Kinnell scolded.

“Nonsense,” Iona shot back. “You fail to listen well enough.”

While the two continued to fling accusations, Torin quietly took his leave and made his way to the cottage. The snap and pop of the flickering hearth flames greeted him when he stepped inside. Kinnell knew him too well when he questioned him about avoiding his wife at night. He had thought to entice her and have her change her mind, but after giving it thought, he found it would not be fair to her. He had given his word and he would keep it. He wanted her to know that she could trust him since she appeared to have no problem trusting him. She shared her thoughts most willingly and discussed things endlessly with him. The strange part was that he was beginning to enjoy it.

He had tried to sleep in his shirt, but he was far too accustomed in sleeping naked to adapt to it. It was another reason he avoided his bed before his wife fell asleep. He was certain that her curiosity would lead to him breaking his word to her.

He gently untangled the covers from around her and slipped into bed and she did what she had done since he first got in bed with her, she turned and wrapped herself around him. This was when he thanked the heavens that she wore a nightdress.

With her head on his chest, her soft hair tickled at his nose and her fresh, sweet scent intoxicated. Bloody hell, he feared he would never be able to keep his hands off her. It was a pleasant surprise to realize how much he was attracted to his wife and a relief. It would make marriage much more pleasurable.

He forced himself to close his eyes and think on something else since his shaft would be at full attention soon if he didn't. He thought on the scroll, but his wife entered that thought as well, the image of her backside up in the air as she hunted through the merchant's cart flashing in his mind. His thoughts hopped from one thing to the next until finally exhausted, he fell asleep.

* * *

“FLORA! FLORA! HELP US! HELP US!”

“Where are you, Mum? I cannot see you,” Flora called out in panic hearing her mum begging desperately for help.

“Please, Flora! Please!”

“I cannot see through the fog, Mum,” Flora said, glancing around, not able to see past the thick fog that surrounded her.

“Listen for me and your da,” her mum called out. “You must help us to...”

Her mum’s voice faded off as she strained to hear her. “Mum. Da. I am here. I will help you.” Her eyes caught a shadow lurking amongst the fog. “Mum! Da! Is that you?” She got no response, so she tried again. “Mum! Da!” her shouts went unanswered.

The shadow appeared as if it was creeping closer. Flora scrunched her eyes to see if she could make out who it was, but she saw nothing more than a dark gray blob that continued to approach her. An unease washed over her, and she got the urge to flee, but for some reason her legs would not budge.

The shadow got closer and closer when suddenly it struck, a heavy warm wind or was it a huge breath? It knocked her over and she felt herself falling, down, down, down she fell. She did the only thing she could, she screamed.

“TORIN!”

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you. You’re safe, Flora,” Torin said, holding her tight in his arms, his heart beating madly. He had barely gotten his eyes open, her restlessness having woken him, when she screamed out his name, her arms flailing. His heart felt as if it had slammed against his chest, her screams were filled with such fear.

She burrowed against him as if she could somehow slip inside him.

“It was a nightmare, nothing more than a nightmare, *mo ghràdh*,” he soothed, stroking her back firmly. He would have her tell him about it, but he did not want to make her relive the fear. She would tell him in her own time. Right now, he only cared about soothing her and assuring her that she was safe. “It’s over. You have nothing to fear.”

“When I am with you I don’t,” she said softly.

He felt a tender catch to his heart as if somehow, she had reached inside him and touched him gently. If her words could do that, how would he feel when she touched him intimately?

He lay silent waiting to see what more she would say and after a few moments he could tell by the way she lay comfortably limp against him that she was asleep.

Sleep did not return immediately to him. He lay there, holding her close, shielding her as best he could from any further nightmares. Until he too, finally succumbed to sleep.

* * *

FLORA STOOD glancing around at the empty bedchamber which she would share for the rest of her days with her husband. His bed was being dismantled and the parts would be brought here to be put back together again. The new mattress was being finished and would be ready by the time the bed was in place. She had chosen various pieces of furnishings from around the keep to add here and some tapestries as well. It was all coming together nicely.

She noticed how Anwen had been staring at her as well as a few of the servants since they had begun work early this morning. She knew why, though none would make mention of it. She had not talked much except to issue orders and that was not like her. She was usually bombarding the servants with endless questions not only about the keep but about themselves. If this was to be her home until her dying day, then she wanted to know all she could about it and everyone here.

Last night, however, had kept her mind occupied since waking this morning. She relived the dream over and over again trying to make sense of it. Why would her parents need help? They had perished from an unknown illness, the physicians who treated them claiming they picked it up while in France. A reasonable explanation since two other scholars with her parents had died as well, while others were ill but survived. Why could her parents possibly need help and how could she help them when they were dead? The dream made her even more determined to discover what she could about the ghost. If she made sense of what was happening here in the keep, perhaps she could make sense of her dream.

She also had another conundrum that puzzled her. She thought she heard her husband call her my love but was not certain. After all, why would he refer to her that way? Or was it something he did often with women who he shared a bed with while she believed such a declaration was meant for someone special? Normally, when she was unsure, she would ask the person directly, yet she could not bring herself to do so in this situation. She had asked herself repeatedly why she was reluctant to do so until finally she admitted to herself that she was not sure if she would like his response. With her thoughts already troubled, she did not need to add more bothersome issues to it.

“Are you not feeling well, my lady?” Anwen asked, coming to stand beside her as the pieces of the bed were carried into the room.

“My thoughts are heavy today, Anwen,” she said and turning to look at the woman suddenly wondered if her husband had ever referred to her as my love. Her mum warned her to mind her questions that some were not proper for her to ask. She believed this was one of those not proper questions, so how did she find out?

“Anything I can help you with, my lady?” Anwen asked.

Now there was an invite if she ever heard one and yet she could hear her mum scold her for thinking so. Then it dawned on her, and she wasted not a moment in asking, “I had a dream about my parents last night. I could hear my da calling my

mum, *mo ghràdh*, and it made me miss them.” She did not need to feign sadness or worry over a lie since her da often called her mum that and she supposed it was why it meant something special to her.

Anwen sighed. “I understand, my lady. I often think I hear my husband call me my love and turn expecting to see him there, but, of course, he’s not, and my heart breaks a bit more.”

“I am so sorry, Anwen,” Flora said, reaching out to comfort her with a thoughtful touch of her arm. “I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for that to happen.”

“In a way it is, and, in a way, it is not,” Anwen admitted. “I long to hear his loving voice call out like that to me even if it is only in my mind. It always brought my heart immense joy and never would I allow another man to say it to me. It would not seem right. It was something I shared with my husband and only my husband. Besides, I fear that if another man called me that I might not ever hear my husband’s voice again calling out to me like he would do and that I would miss terribly.”

That was answer enough for Flora and it pleased her to know it. She noticed then three servants whispering amongst themselves and casting anxious gazes at the door.

“Does something disturb you three?” Flora asked as she approached them.

They all exchanged nervous glances.

“Please tell me. I cannot help you if you do not tell me,” Flora said.

The young lass with light red hair spoke up, though softly. “It is the cleric, my lady. He refuses to enter the keep. If he is too fearful to enter here, then surely he believes no blessing can help this place.”

Another servant spoke up as well. “Which means evil resides here.”

Flora believed that all nonsense, but she realized others did not and she would not ignore or dismiss their fears lightly.

“Continue your work without fear. I will go speak with the cleric and see that he blesses the keep,” Flora assured them.

“He will not obey Lord Torin’s command,” one servant said.

“So, you wonder why he would do so if I asked,” Flora said, a smile spreading across her face. “I have a way with words if you have not noticed.”

She hurried through the keep and outside to see her husband arguing with the cleric.

“Do as you wish with me, my lord, but I am not going in there,” the cleric insisted.

Flora rushed down the stairs ready to do battle with words when the cleric hurried toward her.

“Beware the ghost my—” The cleric gasped, his mouth dropping open and his eyes turning wide as he fell forward against Flora, and they toppled to the ground together.

CHAPTER 11



Flora was having trouble breathing with the cleric on top of her, but she had no problem hearing a fierce roar rip through the air. She shoved at the cleric to push him off her and was shocked when he was suddenly ripped off her. The next thing she knew her husband was kneeling at her side.

“Are you hurt?” Torin asked, his heart pounding furiously in his chest, angry with himself for not reaching her quicker and preventing her fall.

“I do not believe so,” she said, patting her chest and stomach and feeling no pain anywhere. She turned puzzling eyes on her husband. “What happened?” Her glance drifted past his shoulder, and she saw the cleric face down on the ground with an arrow sticking out of his back. “Good, Lord, he has an arrow in his back.”

“That he does, wife.” Torin had his men seeing to the cleric, his only concern was his wife. He slipped his arm beneath her back and eased her up to sit, still concerned she may have been injured.

“Who?” Flora asking, her eyes darting around quickly as if she could spot the culprit.

“I do not know,” he said, his anger mounting that someone had dared to attack on his land. “Though it will not be long before we find him.”

“Who would want to hurt the cleric?” she asked, casting another glance the cleric’s way to watch two warriors cart him off without a care. “Good, Lord, is he dead?”

“I am afraid so,” Torin said. “Are you sure you have suffered no harm?”

She was about to dismiss his concern without thought when her eyes met his. She saw worry in them, true worry. He was concerned for her. He genuinely cared and it touched her heart to know his concern was real.

Flora smiled softly and rested her hand on his arm, giving it a slight squeeze, having realized the feel of his taut muscle always gave her a sense of safety. “The only thing I believe I suffered was a brief loss of breath. Otherwise, nothing pains me.”

With his arm firm around her back, he helped her to her feet and kept hold of her until he was sure she stood steady. He had seen many a warrior tumbled to the ground by another warrior only to stand and collapse dead moments later.

“You will tell me if you have any pain,” he ordered, his thought leaving him worried and apprehensive of letting go of her. In his arms, he could keep her safe. Besides, he enjoyed having her there tucked against him, his hand resting at the curve of her slim waist.

“You would know immediately since I would chatter endlessly about it while trying to make sense of it and determining what to do for it.”

He shook his head and a teasing smile spread across his lips. “I will remember that and know that when silence strikes you, it is time to worry.”

“Precisely,” she said. “Now we have another mystery to solve... who killed the cleric?”

Torin was about to tell her that she was not to concern herself with it when he realized that would be impossible for her to do. So, he held his tongue and continued to hold her.

Flora went right on asking questions. “Why would anyone want to kill the cleric?” Her eyes suddenly rounded. “Or was the cleric his target? Could he have been aiming at someone else and the cleric got in his way?” She gasped and felt her husband’s arm tighten around her. “He stepped in front of me.”

She shook her head. “That makes no sense. Why would someone want me dead?”

Torin did not like her questions and the direction they were going. But she was right. If the cleric had not stepped in front of her, she would be dead right now. Anger raced through him at an alarming speed, and he wanted nothing more than to catch the man responsible and see if it was true... that his target was Flora.

Shouts had them both turning to see Kinnell, along with several warriors, marching a large man toward them. People were mulling about cheering the quick capture of the culprit.

“He is not restrained in any way and he walks with confidence, not fear, and he and the others do not look as though they have been in a scuffle. Did he simply surrender to them?” Flora asked.

Torin listened to his wife, thinking much the same as she did.

“And look at the size of him. He is no small man, tall and broad, and his hair cut close to his scalp yet he has a full dark beard.” She quieted as they drew closer and saw that the man had a scar across one cheek, one at his neck, and a smaller one on his brow. That he was a warrior was obvious.

Again, Torin thought the same as his wife, though he was familiar with the man’s type. He was a man for hire... a renegade.

“This is Walsh, my lord, and whether he tells a truth or tale, I do not know,” Kinnell said.

More people joined the ones who had gathered after the incident, whispering, wondering, and worrying.

“There is another man being brought here as well, but unfortunately he cannot tell his tale since he is dead,” Kinnell said. “We have only Walsh’s tale.”

“How do I believe the word of a renegade?” Torin challenged.

Walsh gave a hardy laugh. “The same as how I would believe the word of a noble—not at all.”

“Tell me your tale,” Torin ordered, seeing the man did not intimidate easily.

“It is cold, and I am thirsty. A warm spot to rest and a hot drink would do much to help me tell my tale,” Walsh said.

“That is true,” Flora said. “A tale is much better told in front of a hearth with a hot brew in hand. You are most welcome to share the heat of our hearth and warm yourself with a hot brew and food if you are hungry.” She looked to Torin. “With your permission, my lord.”

Torin had grown annoyed as his wife appeared to take command until she turned to him and asked his permission. He caught the slight tilt of her head and the way her eyes lit. It made him realize she was up to something and if it helped get to the truth then he would oblige her.

“Aye, wife, see it done,” Torin said.

“Anwen!” she called out as Flora turned searching for the woman who was already heading toward her, and they both hurried to the keep’s stairs.

“Come, we will talk,” Torin said and looked to Kinnell who turned to the two warriors behind him and whispered something, then he caught up with Torin and Walsh to follow them into the keep.

Torin was surprised that drink was already on the table closest to the hearth and that servants lingered if anyone should need anything. However, he was not surprised to see his wife seated at the table. Her message was clear... she would not be left out.

“Your wife joins us?” Walsh asked, not hiding his surprise.

Torin smiled. “My wife loves a good tale.”

“It isn’t that kind of tale,” Walsh whispered. “Might not be suitable for her to hear.”

“I have already heard gruesome tales,” Flora called out.

“How did she hear me? I was whispering,” Walsh said.

“You were not whispering, sir, and I have very good hearing,” Flora informed him. “Now sit and tell your tale, for I grow impatient to hear it.”

Torin shook his head as he watched the large man obey his wife as if he feared her. He went and sat beside her, close enough so that their arms touched, and it pleased him when she pressed even closer against him and rested her leg next to his.

Walsh gulped down a good portion of his drink before he was ready to speak and stopped when he saw six warriors enter the Great Hall and divide to sit at the tables to either side of him, Kinnell joining them.

“I bring no trouble to your clan, Lord Torin,” Walsh said, acknowledging Torin with respect.

“I am pleased to hear that and hope it is true. I am as impatient as my wife... tell the tale.”

He nodded and kept a grip on his tankard as he spoke. “I had hoped to get to the lowland before winter set in, but my departure was delayed. I can feel when a snowstorm is not far off and sensing one approaching, I made haste to find shelter. The Isle of Outerson was the closest place and I hoped you would allow me to winter here since trying to travel could prove deadly.” He took another generous swallow of his ale. “It was when I approached the bridge to the isle that an arrow simply fell from a tree a few feet in front of me. It had not been shot from a bow. It simply fell from the tree. Curious, I glanced up and I thought I spotted a man perched high up in the pine tree. It took some maneuvering around the bottom of the tree to spot him clearly and sure enough he was there, bow and arrow in hand.”

“Are you saying the man perched in the tree shot the arrow that killed the cleric?” Flora asked.

“I did not know at the time who the arrow was intended for or if it was possibly one of Lord Torin’s warriors attempting to see if such a shot would reach a particular distance. I waited

under the tree and surprised the man who was not happy to see me. We fought and I realized he had every intention of taking my life, so I had no choice but to kill him. I left him where he fell and hurried across the bridge to inform the guards what happened. They had me take them to the dead man and then I was brought here.”

“Quite a tale,” Torin said.

“A tall tale for sure,” Kinnell agreed.

“Can an arrow travel that far with accuracy?” Flora asked of no one in particular.

“A skilled marksman can hit his mark from even a greater distance,” Walsh said, “though I would not have believed it if I had not seen it once myself.”

“But did he hit his mark?” Flora asked.

“That I would not know, my lady,” Walsh said. “I had no time to ask him what he was doing here, and I doubt he would have offered an explanation.”

Torin remained silent, knowing his wife would continue to question and with Walsh responding so easily to her, he chose to listen. His wife did not disappoint him, she went right on questioning.

“Why did you wait and watch the man in the tree and not advise the guards immediately of his presence?” Flora asked.

Walsh scratched at his bushy beard. “I suppose at the time I thought it was the right thing to do.” He grinned when bowls of food were placed on the table and quickly snatched up a hunk of cheese. “I did fetch them as soon as the fight ended.”

“Do you often travel alone?” Flora asked.

Walsh shook his head as he chewed the cheese, then spoke. “Nay, my lady. I am often with a group, but as I said my departure was delayed and the others left without me.”

“Why?” Flora asked and as was her way went right on talking. “If you were with a group, why would the group not wait for you? Of course, they could have been wise, knowing the winter would make travel more difficult, and not want to

waste time, but that could very well mean that they thought your delay unnecessary, so they left without you. But what could make them think that... oh! A woman. It must have been a woman that delayed you.”

Torin laughed when Walsh stared opened mouth at her. “My wife is skilled at deducing things quite easily.”

“She is at that,” Walsh agreed.

Flora scrunched her brow. “Yet you wound up leaving. Why when you could have wintered with the woman?”

Torin had not thought of that, but his wife was right. What would have a man leaving a willing woman’s warm bed with winter settling in?

“It sometimes takes time to discover a woman is not who you thought she was. Once I discovered that I took my leave,” Walsh said and hurriedly speared a piece of meat with his knife and took a good-sized bite of it.

Torin glanced at his wife and thought of the similarity of his and Walsh’s situation and could not help but think that the woman could also turn out to be even more pleasing than first believed.

“So, you braved the winter instead of a woman,” Flora said, staring at him. “How strange for a man of your size and confidence to be frightened off by a woman.”

Walsh drew his shoulders back, his chest expanding. “I was not frightened off. I chose to leave. She was looking for a husband. I was not looking for a wife.”

“Wise man,” one of the warriors called out.

“Precisely,” Walsh said and raised his tankard.

Kinnell and the other warriors raised theirs as well, not so Torin.

Flora spoke up, making sure her voice was heard by all. “Be careful who you seek here to warm your bed, for if you lead a clan’s woman astray, I will see that you wed her. And do remember there is only one egress off this isle and it is guarded.”

“You have no power to force me to wed,” Walsh challenged.

Flora smiled. “I never said I would force you. I said I would see that you wed her. And power will not see it done but knowledge will. Now I will leave you gentlemen to talk amongst yourselves.” She stood and winced, her hand going to her side.

Torin looked ready to stand but his wife rested her hand on his shoulder to keep him from doing so.

“I am going to pay Iona a visit. I will not be long,” Flora said.

“Wait there for me,” Torin ordered with a command that was meant to be obeyed without question.

“Aye, my lord,” Flora said.

“Anwen!” Torin called out and the woman hurried to him. “Go with my wife.”

“Aye, my lord,” Anwen said and fetched both their cloaks.

Torin worried that his wife had suffered an injury from the fall that only now made itself known. Then again, it could have been an excuse to leave him with Walsh to ask questions the man would not answer in front of her. He would ask his questions and be done and find out for sure.

* * *

“IONA’S COTTAGE is that way, my lady,” Anwen said, pointing in the opposite direction of where Flora was headed.

“I know and we will go there as soon as we are done elsewhere,” Flora said.

People called out to her as she and Anwen made their way through the village.

“Blessings on you, my lady.”

“Pleased to see you are well, my lady.”

Flora smiled and waved and called out her thanks as she kept a brisk pace leaving no one to question if she had been harmed in the fall.

“My lady, I do not believe Lord Torin would want you leaving the village,” Anwen said as they approached the entrance.

“Then I suppose he will be upset when he discovers I left the isle,” Flora said matter-of-factly. “Hurry, Anwen. It will not take long.”

When they reached the guard post by the bridge two warriors stopped her.

“I wish to see where the dead man was found,” Flora said.

Both warriors glanced at each other not sure what to do.

“It is a simple and easy request. Just escort me over the bridge to where Walsh took you to the dead man,” Flora instructed. “I will not be long.” When the two did not move, she raised her voice with authority. “Now!”

The two warriors jumped and hurried to do as she ordered, Anwen shaking her head as she followed behind her.

Flora glanced around once at the spot. Blood, footfalls, and drag marks covered much of the area. She tilted her head back to look up at the large pine tree.

“Do you climb trees, Anwen?” Flora asked.

“Never, my lady,” Anwen said.

“My cousin, Tavia, did at one time, though no more due to an injury, but I was told it came natural to her. I wonder if it was the same for the dead man... a natural skill.”

“It is starting to snow, my lady, we should return now. The bridge becomes slippery when it snows,” the one warrior said.

Flora was surprised to see large snowflakes falling. She had been so engrossed in looking around that she had not even noticed.

“A moment more,” Flora said. “Was a single arrow found anywhere on the ground?”

“Nay, my lady,” a warrior said.

“Spread out and search around and see if you spot one before the snow can hide it from us,” Flora ordered.

Anwen joined in with the warriors, their heads bent searching.

Flora was just about to give up when Anwen shouted.

“I found it.”

Flora looked to see her holding a single arrow and smiled. “Wonderful! Now we can return to the village.”

“You should have never left the village in the first place, wife!”

CHAPTER 12



Flora waved the arrow in the air as she approached her husband. “We found the arrow Walsh mentioned. It tells us that at least part of the man’s story is true.”

Torin stood in the middle of the bridge, his arms folded across his chest and his face puckered with anger. “You lied to me. You told me you were going to see Iona.”

“I did not lie,” she said as she approached him. “I planned to see Iona, but first I wanted to see where Walsh killed the man and also to see if an arrow could be found to confirm his tale.”

“And what if he simply dropped an arrow on the ground himself to make his tale appear true?” Torin challenged.

“I thought the same but why concoct such a tale when Walsh simply could have said that he came upon the man, and they fought?”

As usual his wife gave a reasonable explanation. “I suppose you have a valid point.”

Flora smiled and hurried her step to him, and her foot caught on an icy patch and her feet went out from under her.

Torin had no intention of being too late to prevent his wife from toppling to the ground for a second time today. He sped toward her, and his arm made it around her waist just in time to yank her up and stop her from hitting the stone pathway.

Flora winced, a pain stabbing at her back.

Torin mumbled several oaths. “I’ve hurt you.”

“Nay,” she assured him. “I felt the pain when I stood before in the keep. I think something poked me in the back when I fell and left me bruised.”

“We go see Iona now!” he ordered, annoyed that he had not made her do so immediately after the fall.

She held up the arrow. “If the man who shot the arrow was a skilled marksman, then I am sure he would be particular about his arrows. This should match the arrows in his quiver and help to confirm Walsh’s tale.”

“Anwen!” Torin called out and the woman took cautious steps once on the bridge to reach him. “Take the arrow to Kinnell and tell him to see if it matches the other arrows in the dead man’s quiver.”

Anwen bobbed her head and took the arrow Flora handed to her.

Torin cast a scowl at his two warriors, who had positioned themselves at the end of the bridge. “My wife is not allowed to cross this bridge without my permission.”

“Aye, my lord,” both echoed together.

Flora stepped out of his embrace and cast a puzzled look on him. “Am I a prisoner here?”

“Of course not,” Torin said.

“Then why do I need your permission to leave the isle?”

“So I can keep you safe. So no one can snatch you away from me. So I do not lose my mind wondering and worrying what may happen to you. So, wife, you will obey me on this!” Torin ordered firmly.

“You would lose your mind worrying about me?” she asked, that part of his remark surprising her and poking at her heart.

Torin went to snap at her that she was his wife, and it was his duty to protect her when he realized that it was not the whole of it. It was two weeks since they had been wed, yet the thought that she would be taken away from him tore at his

heart. That this chatty woman could have somehow worked her way into his heart shocked him.

“You are my wife, and it is my duty to protect you,” he said, thinking, though he could not reason why, that he needed to defend himself.

“Aye, of course,” Flora said but the confusing look in his dark eyes made her wonder if that was not quite true. “Let us go see Iona, then I will return to the keep.”

“You will rest the remainder of the day,” Torin ordered.

“I instruct the servants, not a burdensome task, and I do not want to delay us from taking residence in the keep.”

Torin went to argue and stopped. He was eager for them to take up residence in their bedchamber. “You will rest when needed.”

She smiled softly. “Aye, I will now that your bed will be there for me to do so.”

Torin stared at her, an image of her sleeping in his bed—naked—taking hold in his mind. He did not realize she had hooked her arm around his before directing him along the bridge, the warriors following behind them.

“What do you think?” she asked as they neared Iona’s cottage.

Torin stared at her perplexed. He had not heard a word she had said, his mind having lingered on her in his bed and what they would be doing there once he joined her.

Luckily, his wife went right on talking. “I, myself, think there is some truth to Walsh’s tale, in the points I made to you, but I am not sure if the whole of it is true, which is why I think it would be wise to keep an eye on him.”

He got annoyed with himself for failing to pay attention to her, but at least now he understood what she had asked of him. “I thought the same and I have already ordered that Walsh is to be watched.”

“A wise decision, husband,” Flora praised.

That was something else he noticed his wife did frequently, offered praise when deserved, not simply to appease a person. She also complimented when deserved and he had seen how the servants were growing to admire her. But the thing he found he favored the most had been hearing her laughter at times in the keep and hearing the servants laugh as well. There had never been laughter when his da ruled and never a smile on the servants' faces. Not so now. Ghost or not, smiles more than fear could be seen on those in the keep.

He had also seen how the servants and people gathered in concern for his wife when the incident happened. None in the clan had shed a tear when his mum had died or his da. His wife was here barely a week and already the people worried over her.

The words slipped out without thought. "You are a good woman, wife."

"I try to be," Flora said. "My da and mum taught me the importance of goodness but wisdom as well since they warned me of the balance of things, meaning if there is goodness there is also evil and where there is wisdom there is also ignorance."

"And did they teach you how to combat evil and ignorance?" Torin asked, surprised he was finding his wife's endless chatter enlightening at times.

"Knowledge. It is a mighty weapon," Flora said proudly. "My da taught me to wield such a powerful weapon with care and I attempt to do just that the as best I can."

"You had a wise da," Torin said with a bit of envy. "My da taught me little."

"Nonsense. He taught you something particularly important," she insisted.

Nothing she said could prove her words right, but he asked, "How so?"

"Your da's example taught you how not to be a da, an important lesson for you will know how to be a good and loving da."

Torin was shocked silent. He had never even considered that, but his wife was right. He would not be like his da to his children. He wanted more with them. He wanted to love them and have them love him and teach them what they needed to know to not only survive in this world but to have a good life.

He gazed at his wife, smiling as she extended her hand out to catch the falling snowflakes and at that moment realized just how perfect she was for him. She would not only teach their children much, but she would also teach him as well.

“My da laughed at me when I was very young as he watched me try to catch a snowflake. He thought to tease me, telling me if I could catch one, I could keep it.” Flora laughed. “He was surprised when I informed him that that was nonsense since a snowflake would melt when touched. That was the day he began to teach me how to read.”

“Your da sounds like he was an amazing man and a loving da.”

“He was,” she said and hugged his arm. “I think that is why the dreams I have of him and my mum disturb me so much.”

“I am glad you are here,” Iona called out as they approached her cottage.

Annoyance poked at Torin. He had hoped his wife would finally share her dream, though more a nightmare, with him, but at least now he knew that she had experienced more than the one he knew about and that they concerned her parents.

“I was with an ill bairn when the incident took place, but Kinnell made sure I learned about it. Do you suffer any pain?” Iona asked.

Torin answered, “Her back.”

“Let me have a look and I will see what can be done,” Iona said and reached out to take Flora’s arm while dismissing Torin with a wave of her hand. “We need no help from you, my lord.”

“Help or not, I will see for myself what she suffers,” Torin ordered to Iona’s surprise.

Iona bobbed her head. “As you wish, my lord.”

Flora’s eyes went wide as soon as she stepped into Iona’s cottage. Cocks sat on tabletops, dried plants hung from the ceiling, and a large mortar and pestle sat on the table in front of the hearth, a bunch of dried leaves lying next to it waiting to be crushed.

A plethora of scents struck Flora’s nose and questions slipped over her tongue eager to be asked. Unfortunately, her husband was quick to stop her.

“Do not think to ask Iona endless questions. You are here for her to see to your care, nothing else,” Torin ordered.

“Another time, Iona,” Flora said.

Iona nodded. “Whenever you wish, my lady. Now tell me what pains you.”

Torin listened to his wife detail her pain and even offer an explanation for it. He then watched as Iona pressed along the areas that Flora pointed out to her. He winced when his wife did as if he felt her pain.

Iona handed a small crock to Torin. “My lady probably suffered a bruise. Rub this on the spot for a couple of days. It will help heal her.”

Torin took it with a nod, thinking about the control he would need when he applied the slave to his wife’s naked skin.

“I took a quick look at the dead man. No bruises. I would say that his life ended quickly without much of a fight,” Iona said.

Torin nodded. “That is good to know.”

Flora waited until they stepped outside to say, “If there was not much of a fight would that mean Walsh caught the man unaware and did not wait to kill him. But why? The only reasonable explanation would be to silence him, which would mean Walsh knew why the man was there in the first place.”

CHAPTER 13



Early evening found Torin staring at the crock of salve on the table, though it was more like the crock of salve stared at him, taunting, poking, teasing him. He and Flora had discussed Walsh and the incident while they ate supper. They had also discussed how things were going in the keep and all the while the crock tormented him.

Flora stretched herself off the chair, her arms spreading wide before she winced and reached behind her to rub just above her right hip and winced again. She lowered her arms, yawned, then snatched up the small crock.

Torin sprung forward in his chair. “I can see to that for you.”

“Not necessary. I can do it myself,” Flora said, wanting to be done with it so she could seek the bed and sleep, the day having exhausted her.

All the teasing and tormenting that bloody crock had caused him only to now be disappointed stirred Torin’s ire. He was itching to touch his wife more intimately and the crock had given him the perfect excuse to do so. Though maybe it was better he kept his hands off her for now. He had given her his word and while he thought now and again on tempting her, it always came back to his word. If a man could not stand by his word, then he was not a man. Besides, it was only two days before they moved into the keep. He could wait two days.

Flora removed her tunic, folded it, then placed it on top of the chair. She went and sat on the bed to lean over and remove

her shoes and grimaced, her hand shooting to her back.

Torin bolted out of his chair and went to her, dropping down on his haunches in front of her. "I'll see to it for you."

"I can do—"

He pushed her hand gently away. "You're tired and your back pains you."

Flora yawned again. "I will not deny nor argue with that."

After he got both shoes off, he eased her to her feet. "You should sleep in your stockings tonight. It's cold." *And it will help me keep my hands off you*, he thought, though was not sure if the stockings would serve as a sufficient shield.

"Nay, the stockings would annoy me. The only thing I wear to bed is my nightdress."

He did not need to be reminded of that. He had realized it the first night he had slept beside her, and it had not been easy to ignore. The garment would bunch up around her thighs and he would wake to find his bare legs entangled with her naked ones. He loved the feel of them soft and warm against him, but bloody hell if it didn't arouse him.

Another yawn from her had him shaking his head. He realized how exhausted she was, and his ardor cooled. She needed to sleep.

He dropped down in front of her again, only this time it was to remove her stockings. He made quick work of it, though he would have preferred to linger, her soft skin begging him to do just that.

"I love your touch," she whispered, not able to ignore the way his fingers brushed along her calves and sent a lovely sensation running through her.

He raised his head and their eyes met, and he knew he was in trouble. "You are tired."

"Not too tired for a kiss," Flora said softly and leaned forward, her lips reaching for his.

It was just a kiss. One simple kiss, he told himself and brought his lips to hers.

It may have been a simple kiss, but it shot a jolt of passion through him that hit him hard, an intense passion that he had never known before now here with her. It was as if he had never genuinely enjoyed a kiss, never genuinely enjoyed touching a woman, never genuinely wanted a woman as much as he wanted his wife.

His hand went to rest at her back while his lips took command of the kiss, demanding more from her, from them both. Her hand slipped around the back of his neck to hold tight, to keep him there and not let him go. It flared his passion even more and he feared the kiss would not be enough for either of them.

She leaned forward, pressed her chest against his and his hand slipped down her back to her waist just above her hip and gripped there.

Flora tore her mouth off his, a sharp gasp escaping her, and squeezed her eyes shut tight against the pain.

Torin cursed himself a thousand times over, having been so caught up in their kiss that he had forgotten all about her injury.

“Forgive me, Flora, I forgot,” he said, angry that he had caused her pain.

She rested her brow to his as the pain subsided. “There is nothing to forgive, husband.” She chuckled. “It is the fault of the kiss. It was so magnificent that it made us both lose all common sense, and I did not mind it at all.”

There went another poke at his heart. How the woman could make him feel good when he had caused her pain amazed him.

“I agree with you there, wife. I have never known kisses as magnificent as the ones I share with you,” he said.

Flora raised her head. “Truly. I do well at kissing?”

“Exceptionally so.”

“I thought I would have to practice more.”

Torin was about to tell her that she could still do that when she went right on talking.

“But it never hurts to keep practicing, become even more proficient.”

“Aye. Aye,” he agreed, nodding.

“We can practice often.”

Torin went right on agreeing. “Aye. Aye.”

A yawn rushed out of her. “I want to keep kissing you.” Her hand reached out to rest against his chest. “And touch you. I don’t know why but I have this need to touch you, Torin.”

“And I want to touch you, Flora. I want to roam your naked body with my hands and my lips and get to know every part of you intimately,” he said softly and brushed his lips over hers. “But another night when you are not tired and in pain.”

Flora contained the sensitive shudder that his remark had sent through her and flamed the small ache that had settled between her legs. She felt a bit breathless but managed to say, “I can do the same to you.”

Torin kept hold of the groan that rushed to his lips, but he could not prevent a bit of it from slipping out.

Not trusting the rest from spewing out, he nodded, until the groan dissipated in his chest, then said, “Aye, you can touch and kiss my body whenever you want.”

Her hand fell gently to rest between his legs and without thought gave his hard shaft a squeeze. “Even there?”

This time Torin could not stop the groan if he wanted to, it rushed so fast and powerful through him and spewed from his mouth. “Don’t do that.”

Her hand shot off him. “I need permission?”

“At the moment, aye,” he ordered, trying to maintain his sanity.

He hurried to his feet. He could not let their conversation continue. She would ask endless questions that would enflame him even more and that would be it. And he would not cause her pain as he had done before, though, at the moment, he was suffering mightily.

“Sleep. You are exhausted,” he ordered and walked to the door.

Flora looked to the crock she had left near the hearth. “You do not wish to help me apply the salve.”

Torin took a good breath before turning. “Do you want to seal our vows tonight while you suffer pain and cannot fully enjoy it? For if I apply that salve to your injury that is what will happen. That I can promise you.”

Flora hesitated, then shook her head. “Nay, I am tired, and my side does pain me. It would be foolish of me to do so.”

“Aye, wife, it would, for it is not a quick coupling we will share. It will be a good portion of the night that I make love to you.” He turned and walked out, the wood door rattling as he closed it with such force.

Flora sat staring at the closed door, her mind on one thing only.

That I make love to you.

He had not said they would couple, or that he would poke her or rut with her, some of the phrases her mum had made known to her and the difference of each. He had said he would make love to her. Could he possibly love her?

Her hand went to her stomach, feeling a flutter of excitement. Each day she had found her husband more and more to her liking. If he was beginning to feel the same about her then there was hope they could have a good marriage, a good life together. And maybe, just maybe, they might even come to love each other.

* * *

“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WALSH?” Torin asked Kinnell, watching the sizeable man carry a bundle of peat into Philip’s cottage.

“I have yet to decide. He is helpful to those in need of it and he joined the men in clearing snow along the paths through the village early this morning, but I wonder if he is too friendly, too accommodating,” Kinnell said, his eyes on the man as well. “What do you think of him?”

“I think his tale is just that, a tale, and it makes me wonder over the truth of what he is doing in this area. Continue to keep watch over him.”

“I have men watching him at all times,” Kinnell assured him. “I must say your wife has all in the clan talking about her bravery in the keep and that she is keen on investigating yesterday’s incident. They believe she has little fear.”

“Something that worries me,” Torin admitted.

“The people feel it is an attribute and that she will make you an excellent wife. Many have also expressed how she is truly interested in the clan since she stops and talks with everyone. Philip particularly favors her since she asks him endless questions about the clan, and he is only too glad to discuss his younger years. Many are extremely glad to stop and talk with her.”

“Because she shows true interest, and they see it.”

Kinnell jumped and turned with haste. “How is it I cannot ever hear you approach?”

“You never listen when here in the village. You believe yourself safe here, so you do not make the effort to do so,” Iona said. “Lady Flora not only is interested when speaking with people she also listens to what they have to say and asks questions of them. Unlike you who listens with a half-ear.”

Kinnell quickly defended himself. “I listen well enough.”

Iona rolled her eyes in response.

“I do not listen to you because you are always harping—”

“On how you don’t listen,” Iona said.

“I hear and see everything,” Kinnell argued.

“Not likely,” Iona said, shaking her head and curls of her flaming red hair bouncing about. “I waste my breath on you.” She turned to Torin. “I looked at your wife’s wound. The bruise is sizeable enough but already shows signs of fading, so it does not worry me.”

“But something else does?” Torin asked, seeing concern in her bold green eyes.

“She is quiet. Even the servants have noticed her silence,” Iona said.

“Lord Torin must be pleased to hear that,” Kinnell said.

“Sometimes you can be a complete fool,” Iona said with a snappish tongue. “Nay, not sometimes, most times.”

Torin barely heard the two continue to bicker, his thoughts on his wife. She had advised him when worry should be considered.

I will know that when silence strikes you it is time to worry.

“Has my wife been silent since morning?” Torin asked, having left their bed before she woke, not trusting himself to remain there. Her softness and warmth had been far too inviting not to mention the way she cuddled tightly against him.

“From what the servants have said, aye, she has,” Iona said.

“I will go speak with her, and you two,” Torin said in a commanding tone, “end your bickering. I grow tired of hearing it.”

His command needed no response. He hurried off, eager to see his wife and find out what was troubling her. He was struck by the difference in the keep as soon as he entered the Great Hall. A fresh scent filled the air and a blazing fire in the hearth heated the room comfortably. Numerous candles cast a pleasant glow, lighting even the darkest corners, and tapestries had been hung over the window shutters to keep the cold out. The dais wore a crisp white cloth and two tankards waited

upon it for the lord and his lady. His wife had done an excellent job of bringing the keep back to life.

“Where is my wife?” he called out and more than one servant responded.

“The old master bedchamber, my lord.”

Torches snug in their metal sconces lit the stone staircase just as they once did, only this time he heard chatter instead of the oppressive silence that once existed in the keep.

Two servant women rounded the curve and they and their laughter stopped abruptly upon seeing him. They quickly bobbed their heads and hurried back up the stairs to let him pass. He recognized them both having had worked here when his da ruled and he saw the fear in their eyes as soon as they saw him. Memories often died hard especially frightening ones.

Torin stopped when he reached the landing where the two servant women waited and smiled. “It is good to finally hear chatter in the keep. I do not believe my wife would have it any other way since she chatters endlessly herself.”

Their faces brightened with smiles.

“Lady Flora is wonderful,” one woman said.

“Aye, Lady Flora is delightful,” the other said.

“I am pleased to hear that,” he said and after a bob of their heads the two women hurried off.

The door to his bedchamber stood ajar and with no sound coming from it, he wondered if his wife was there. He pushed the door open slowly and stepped into the room, surprised to see it devoid of furnishings and his wife standing in front of the hearth gazing down at the burning logs that had yet to chase the chill from the room.

He went to her, spreading out his cloak as he did and as soon as he stepped behind her, he enclosed his arms around her to tuck her snug against him as he wrapped his cloak tightly around them.

She spoke not a word as she relaxed against him, though her body shivered lightly, grateful for the warmth.

“You are silent. Something troubles you,” he said.

“Another dream,” she said softly.

“It did not wake you this time?” he asked, recalling that she had slept peacefully.

“You were not there when I woke from it this morning.”

It annoyed him that he hadn’t been there for her. “I wish I had been.”

“I do too. For some reason it soothes me to wake in your arms after such a disturbing dream.”

“I will be sure not to leave our bed until you wake from now on,” he assured her.

“As much as I would like that, it is unreasonable of me to expect that from you. There will be times duty will demand that you be elsewhere. They are only dreams. I will manage.”

His wife had an uncanny way of being right most times, but he would do his best to be there for her. Besides, he much preferred to be in bed with her when she woke.

There was one thing he could do for her now that might help.

“Tell me about these dreams,” he urged.

Flora did not hesitate. She wanted to discuss them, make sense of them, help settle them.

“They are about my mum and da. “They are upset in the dream. They keep asking me to help them. I never see them, the fog is too thick in my dreams, but I do see a shadow that lurks and, somehow, I know it is neither my mum nor da. The shadow makes me uncomfortable. I cannot help but think they are somehow lost, and they are reaching out to me for help.”

“What happened to your mum and da?” Torin asked, hoping to find a way to help his wife.

“They returned ill from a trip to France. I so wanted to go with them, but Lord Simon, a patron of my da’s, requested my help at a small abbey he generously supported. His lordship felt the nuns were poorly organized and asked if I would teach them how to run the abbey more efficiently. I accomplished the task and returned home the same day my parents did. Their illness was apparent, and they took to bed immediately. They died a week later within hours of each other.”

“I am sorry for your loss, Flora, but it was good that they at least made it home and did not die on foreign soil away from you.”

“Something I have thought of often and that I am grateful for,” she admitted.

“I continue to dream of my grandfather, and he died years ago. He often offers me advice or reminds me not to be like my da. He was more of a da to me than my own da.”

“Does he ever reach out to you for help?” Flora asked anxiously.

“I can’t say that he has.”

“I feel I should help my parents, but I don’t know how. They are dead. How could I possibly help them?” she asked mystified.

“I wish I knew,” Torin said, and he did since he did not like seeing his wife so troubled.

He held her, not used to the silence that grew heavy around them. When he finally was about to break the oppressive silence, his wife stepped out of his arms and took hold of his hand.

“Come with me,” she said and led him out of the room.

He followed behind her up the stairs and into the room that was now their new bedchamber.

“Our bedchamber is finished. We can sleep here tonight,” she said with a soft smile.

CHAPTER 14



“Are you not pleased with it?” Flora asked when her husband remained silent as he glanced around the room. “If there is anything you do not like about it, I can see it changed, though I think it will suit us well. The room may not be as large as the other one, but it holds all we need, and we can make new and happy memories here. I hope to fill it with much joy and love—”

Torin silenced his wife with a kiss, a powerful one, leaving her a bit breathless. “It is perfect, absolutely perfect. We need no large bedchamber since I intend to keep you close.”

He smiled and it spread as he took another look around the room. His bed fit well and was dressed in clean bedding. Two chests, stacked on top of each other, sat on one side of the bed while only one chest sat on the side of the other. Candles sat in metal holders that had been dusted clean. Freshly cleaned tapestries covered the two shuttered windows and the scent of pine filled the air from the fresh cut branches along the rough-hewn mantel. A small table with two benches tucked beneath sat to the side of the hearth and several pegs had been added to the wall and held not only some of his garments but some of his wife’s as well.

Flora smiled, watching the smile grow on her husband’s face and the way his eyes lit with joy.

“You made the bedchamber ours. There is not a trace of my mum here. You made it warm and welcoming, and I cannot wait to share it with you.”

“And I with you,” Flora said, her troubling thoughts having faded seeing her husband so pleased. “I think it would be wise to arrange a celebration, when the time is right, in the Great Hall, so people can come and see there is nothing to fear here.”

“I agree. The clan could use some festivity.”

“I will go discuss it with Verena, so she is aware of it and prepares as necessary. She is doing well overseeing the kitchen, and then I will have the last of our things moved here from the cottage.”

“See that our meal is brought here to our bedchamber this evening. Tonight is about us and the start of our lives together as husband and wife.”

A slight shiver of anticipation trickled over Flora. It was the very reason she had taken such care when preparing this room. She wanted all the old memories swept away with the dust and dirt, leaving it fresh and clean for them to make a new start here.

“Aye, as husband and wife,” she agreed, letting him know she felt the same.

They both turned hearing footfalls coming up the stairs.

A servant stopped at the open door and bobbed his head. “Pardon, my lord, but I was sent to tell you that your warriors await you.”

“I will be right there,” Torin said.

Flora turned a generous smile on the young lad. “Thank you, Mather. Are the treats ready for the servants?”

The lad smiled broadly as he bobbed his head. “Aye, my lady. I have already enjoyed one.”

“One sweet treat is not enough. Go have one or two more. I told Verena to make certain there was a generous amount for all.”

“Aye, my lady and there is plenty for all, and we are very appreciative.”

“Wonderful. Now go and enjoy,” Flora said playfully, shooing him off.

“Do you know all the servants’ names?” Torin asked.

“Of course,” Flora said, struck with a hint of surprise that he should ask. “It would be rude of me not to. How can I see and work with them every day and not refer to them by name.” She shook her head. “That would not be at all proper or courteous.” Her brow scrunched as she asked, “Do you not know the servants’ names?”

“Not all of them,” he said, feeling the need to defend himself.

“I will help you learn them,” she offered.

He almost shook his head but stopped. He felt the need to be defensive while she offered no judgment, only help. More and more he was finding his chatty wife appealing.

He hooked her quickly around the waist and planted a hasty kiss on her lips. “Later, wife, you are all mine, and I have plans for you.”

“And I for you, husband,” she said, a gleam of desire dancing in her dark eyes.

This time Torin shook his head. “Do you know what you do to me when you say something like that?”

“Something good I hope,” she said joyfully.

He took hold of her hand and placed it against the bulge at his plaid.

“Oh!” she said with excitement. “I learned something new... I can arouse you with mere words. That is good to know, and I am so looking forward to touching your shaft tonight and seeing how it responds so I can learn what pleasures you.”

Torin groaned, shook his head, and went to leave the room, his wife’s hand on his arm stopping him.

“Where do you go with your warriors?” she asked.

“We are going to scout the woods on the other side of the bridge to see if we can find a campsite where the dead man or Walsh may have camped.”

“And to see if others might have been with either of them,” she said, throwing out the suggestion. “I will join you.”

“Absolutely not, and besides, you have much to finish here for all to be ready for tonight,” he reminded.

Flora debated silently with herself and the thought of experiencing intimacy with her husband won out.

“You will tell me what you find?” she asked.

“You have my word on it,” he said, having found he enjoyed discussing things with her and hearing her perspective on the various issues.

She kissed his cheek. “Later, husband.”

“On that you have my word as well,” he said with a wicked smile that Flora returned in kind.

She spent a few moments taking stock of the room and making a mental list of small things she wanted done before tonight. She passed on the list to Anwen, who was enjoying a sweet treat in the Great Hall.

“Do not rush. Enjoy the respite and finish the sweet treats and your hot brews, there is time yet to return to your chores,” she said to the servants who looked ready to rush off. “I am going to talk with Verena. It is time to plan a celebration.”

Smiles spread and cheers rang out as Flora hurried to the kitchen.

Flora took her time speaking to Verena and going over a plan for the celebration, though a date was left to be set. They were almost finished when Walsh showed up at the kitchen door.

“I offered to fetch Philip’s food since he has difficulty getting around in the snow,” Walsh said.

Verena looked to Flora for permission.

“Give him the basket,” Flora said, having learned that Torin made sure the elderly in the clan were sent food if needed. “I will walk with you to Philip’s to see how he fares.”

Walsh shrugged. “Your choice, my lady, but you will be disappointed if you think I steal the old man’s food.”

“You are a mercenary. I cannot be sure what you would do.”

“And yet you will walk with me to the cottage? Is that not foolish?” Walsh asked with a chuckle.

Flora chuckled herself. “What would be foolish is if you would attempt to harm me with so many of my husband’s warriors and clan members about. Unless you have a notion to meet death today.”

“You have a quick mind.”

“I try,” Flora said. “Now let’s not keep Philip waiting.”

Sufficient snow had fallen to entice children to play, snowballs flying, and screeches of delight filled the air as Flora walked alongside Walsh through the village.

“You have questions for me,” Walsh said.

“Of course I do,” Flora said. “I am trying to make sense of your true reason for showing up here, but it eludes me.”

“You do not believe my tale?”

“I believe parts of it may be true, but I am still holding out judgment until I can find out more. So why don’t you help me,” Flora suggested.

“There is not much more to add to what I already told you, my lady,” Walsh said.

“I am afraid I do not believe you,” Flora said quite matter-of-factly. “One glance tells me you are a seasoned mercenary which means you trust few and lies are common for you. Not that I blame you. Your tasks cannot be all that easy with betrayal, lies, and secrets being a part of them. But I also believe that each man has a line they will not cross, for once

they do they owe their soul to the devil, and most everyone fears the devil.”

“You have to believe in him to fear him,” Walsh said.

“You do not believe in him?”

“There is a devil in all of us,” he said with a laugh. “It is whether we rule him or he rules us.”

“An interesting thought,” Flora said, thinking on something similar her da had once remarked on. “My da would agree with you. He told me that evil and good reside together. You choose which one you want to be. Which one did you choose, Walsh?”

He grinned. “I found that it depends on the moment.”

“I understand now,” Flora said, nodding.

“Understand what?”

“You have not known love. Love makes all the difference.”

Walsh grunted. “Love is the devil’s toy. He dangles it in front of you, lets you play with it, then snatches it away and leaves you in pain.”

“You have loved and lost,” Flora said with surprise.

“And I will not be fooled by the devil’s hand again,” Walsh snapped.

Flora stopped, forcing Walsh to do the same. “Your pain does not let you see clearly. Would you rather have never known that love and all the joy it brought you? Would you give up all the beautiful and loving memories for the pain to be gone? Would you let go of the love that brought you so much pleasure, never to know it again? I understand you now. You have so much pain in your heart that you care not if you cause other people pain. You, Walsh, have never truly known love, for a person who loved would never do anything to harm its memories.”

Walsh went to argue, and Flora snapped her hand up in the air. “I am going to have someone speak to you who knows the true value of love.” She smiled when she spotted the person

stepping out of the keep just as she finished. “Anwen!” she shouted, and the woman hurried to her.

“I don’t need anyone telling me about love. I know what I need to know,” Walsh snapped and turned to walk away but not before casting a quick glance at Anwen.

Flora spotted it... a quick flash of interest. She would keep an eye on him.

“My lady,” Anwen said when she reached Flora, though her eyes drifted to the retreating Walsh. “Is something wrong? Has that man behaved badly to you?”

“Nay, Anwen. He is a broken-hearted man who has yet to heal.”

“A broken heart leaves a scar, my lady, that tears open now and again to haunt and hurt, but sometimes the loving memories can soothe, and I am grateful for them,” Anwen said sadly.

“I would hurt if I lost Torin,” Flora said, shocking herself, the words falling from her lips of their own accord.

Anwen smiled. “You can see it in your eyes that you care for him and that he cares for you. It is a good way to begin a marriage.”

“You see it in his eyes that he cares for me?” Flora asked anxiously as she hooked her arm with Anwen, shocking her, as they walked toward the keep.

“I have, my lady, and I am not the only one. It is obvious since Lord Torin has never gazed upon a woman the way he gazes upon you.”

“My mum told me she knew she loved my da when she first looked upon him. But I wonder if that is possible... to look at a stranger and instantly know you love him.”

“It was that way with me and my husband. When I first saw Glendon I lost my heart to him. He was so handsome and had the most wonderful smile,” Anwen said, the lovely memory bringing a generous smile to her face. She shook her head. “I almost forgot, my lady, a question has arisen since it

has been made known that you and his lordship will move into the keep tonight.”

Flora understood without any further explanation. “I intended to make it known when I returned. No one will remain in the keep after dark tonight. Have our supper left in our bedchamber. We will do fine on our own.”

“Are you sure, my lady?” Anwen asked concerned.

“It is time, Anwen, that the keep is returned to his lordship and the ghost is sent on his way.”

* * *

“WHAT DID YOU FIND?” Flora asked her husband as they sat eating supper in their bedchamber.

Torin was eager for the intimate night ahead with his wife and he wanted no delays or interferences. To achieve that, he had to first satisfy his wife’s curiosity and questions.

“A campsite was found and farther from the bridge than I expected,” he said.

“Were there any signs of more than one person being there?” Flora asked.

“Not that we could find,” Torin said, noticing how robustly his wife ate. He had thought she might be nervous about the night ahead, but she showed no signs of it.

“How deep was the ash from the campfire?” she asked.

“I do not know. We were lucky to find it with the snow that had fallen and covered the ground and what—” He paused and shook his head. “I was so pleased to find the campsite that I never gave thought that the depth of the ashes could give me an idea of how long he had camped there.”

“I imagine you were more concerned that he may have had cohorts with him which would present a present danger.”

Torin leaned forward, placing his arms on the table’s edge. “I have never known a woman whose mind works so quickly.”

Flora chuckled. “My da said that as soon as I could talk, something I did at a noticeably young age, I asked questions. Gratefully, he and my mum did not mind. I am also grateful that they fed my curiosity. It is something I hope to do with our children.”

She constantly delivered unexpected joyful blows to his heart or gut, not that he minded. He quite enjoyed them.

“I will be honest with you, though, since I expect honesty from you,” she said after taking a sip of wine.

“Please do and I will strive to do the same.”

“I have been taking a mixture that works well to prevent conception. With not knowing what kind of husband you would make... I thought it best to wait and see.”

“I understand your reasoning, but an heir is important not only to me but to the clan as well and I do not want to delay it.” He grew concerned when his wife remained silent and worried over why that might be, and he asked, “You do not want to carry my child?”

“Nay! Nay! It is not that. It is just that I know nothing about carrying a child, delivering one, and no knowledge of raising one since I am an only child, and I have had little access to bairns.”

“There are many women here that will help you.”

Flora nodded. “Aye, I have no doubt of that, but I would prefer to get to know the women and their bairns as well before rushing into it. I also would like to make certain that all is settled with the ghost, so it causes no more problems in the keep.”

“I will give you a month, no more,” Torin commanded, leaving no chance for debate.

“Tell me why that decision is yours and not mine?” Flora asked and quickly added, “and do not say it is because you are my husband.”

“But that is the reason,” Torin said. “A husband’s word is to be obeyed.”

“Why?”

Torin appeared puzzled. “It is the way of things.”

“Because men command it so?” Flora shook her head. “This is the very reason I had decided never to wed. I wanted no one making decisions for me that I was capable of making on my own. Though if I had decided to wed, I would have preferred to find a husband who would discuss things with me so that we could make decisions together, not have decisions made for me.”

“That would be a rare husband,” Torin said. “I imagine your da made decisions for your mum.”

Flora went to argue and stopped, recalling a few times she had heard her mum protesting decisions her da had made that had concerned her.

“It is simply the way of things, Flora,” Torin said.

Her husband’s remark was similar to what her mum had said when she had confessed that she had heard their argument. That incident had been the start of her questioning whether she would ever wed.

Seeing his wife’s disappointment and not wanting their night spoiled, Torin said, “I will do my best to discuss things with you before making any decision that concerns you.” Her instant, wide smile made him break out in one of his own.

“That you would even consider doing that for me—for us—pleases me very much.”

“And I am going to please you even more tonight, wife,” he said, his grin turning wicked.

Flora stood. “Let us not waste another moment, for I am eager to do the same to you.”

CHAPTER 15



Torin stood so fast he knocked over the bench he was sitting on.

“I think I recall my mum saying something about it being considered more proper to keep a nightdress on when engaged in coupling. But I believe that defeats the purpose. How does a wife or husband learn if they cannot see what works and what doesn’t? Unless, of course, it is not permissible to be completely naked in front of each other, but since you have experience and I do not, I bow to your knowledge.”

“Naked,” Torin said his shaft rising far too rapidly to the occasion.

“Wonderful,” she said delighted he agreed and began to strip off her garments.

Torin froze for a moment, not expecting her to be so accommodating. He thought she might shy away, and he would have to coax her, but she seemed just as eager as he did. He shook himself out of his thoughts and hurried out of his garments.

“I have never stood naked in front of anyone. Even my mum expected a certain modesty from me if I required care from her. So, to strip naked in front of you seems a bit intimidating and yet I do not find it as uncomfortable as I thought I might.” She turned to face him naked, and her eyes widened, seeing him naked as well, and she glanced over him slowly. “You are beautifully proportioned as if sculpted by a

master artist, and your shaft is quite impressive in size. At least I believe it is since I have never seen one.”

He heard her but was far too busy assessing her and he feared his shaft might embarrass him and spill his seed before he even touched her. She was far more appealing than he had imagined, and he had spent endless time imagining her naked. Her breasts were plump, her large nipples rosy and her body was perfectly curved, her hips having width to them just as he liked. He could not wait to touch her.

That all came to a crushing halt when she turned slightly, and he caught sight of the large bruise at her waist and upper hip. He hurried to her, turning her gently to get a better look and grimaced when he did.

“Your wound is far worse than I thought,” he said.

“It is a bruise, nothing more and will fade with time,” Flora said, a tingling sensation racing over her when he gently ran his hand over the bruised area.

“It must pain you,” he said.

His concern was evident in his tone and in his narrowed eyes and it touched Flora’s heart that he cared she should suffer so.

“When pressed on but otherwise I suffer not,” she said, fearful he might think to delay the sealing of their vows and realizing she would be disappointed.

“I will not see you suffer,” Torin commanded.

“I will suffer if you delay sealing our vows,” she argued softly, her impatience surprising herself.

“You desire me?” Torin asked, seeing it there in her dark eyes but wanting to hear her admit it.

Flora reached out and ran her hand over his chest that rippled with the most alluring muscles. “If desire means this tingle that races uncontrollably through me and settles between my legs, and makes me impatient to seal our vows, then aye, I very much desire you.”

“My passion runs as uncontrollably for you as yours does for me. My shaft throbs with desire for you and my heart beats madly,” he found himself admitting.

“I am glad you tell me this for I wish to learn about pleasure and how it affects you and myself as well. I also do not want to be ignorant when it comes to intimacy between a husband and wife, even down to what some might think an insignificant detail.” She took hold of his hand. “Like when your hand closes around mine. It sends a most pleasurable sensation through me.”

He tucked that bit of information away and leaned down to nibble at her neck. “Your lessons begin tonight, wife, and I promise that you are going to feel even more pleasurable sensations.”

His teeth nibbled along her neck sending a shudder of pleasure running over her.

“You are cold?” he asked, feeling her shudder against him.

“Nay, it is the nips of your teeth on my skin that causes such pleasure.” And instinct or curiosity, she did not know which and did not care, had her hand drifting down to cup his hard shaft.

His body stiffened.

“My touch causes you discomfort?” she asked, though did not move her hand away, liking the silky feel of him.

“Nay, the opposite. It brings me immense pleasure.”

“This is good,” she said, instinctively stroking him, “for it is amazing how your shaft can feel so hard, so powerful, and yet so soft to the touch.”

“Your touch very much pleases me, but I fear if you continue to stroke me this night will end much quicker than I had hoped.”

She turned innocent eyes on him. “But I wish to touch all of you to see not only how it makes you feel but how it makes me feel as well.”

Torin groaned, realizing this night was going to be far different than he expected and far more satisfying than he expected as long as he could keep control of his incessantly throbbing shaft to enjoy it.

He captured the back of her neck in a gentle grip and brought his lips down on hers to kiss her into submission, though it was not necessary since she responded with a demand of her own.

He ripped his mouth off hers breathless when the kiss demanded more, and he scooped her up in his arms and headed for the bed.

An agonizing moan ripped through the room halting his steps and he hurried his wife to her feet and shoved her behind him expecting to see someone come through the door. No one did and when he turned, it was to see his wife hurrying to snatch up her garments.

“We must hunt the sound down and see where it came from,” she said, slipping her shift over her head.

Torin cursed the ghost ten times over as he dropped his shirt over his head and quickly wrapped his plaid around him before yanking on his boots.

“Your shoes and wool tunic, the keep is cold,” he ordered.

She nodded and hurried to do as he said then hurried to the door, her husband grabbing her arm and stopping her.

“You will stay behind me and do as I say or I will remove you from the keep. Is that clear, wife?” he asked, seeing how eager she was to investigate and not trusting what her curiosity might get her into.

The moan came again.

“We must hurry. The ghostly sound is fading,” she urged.

“When we find him, I am going to make sure he stays dead,” Torin said, angry that the ghost had interrupted the night with his wife.

“Perhaps that is why he moans, he wishes to go where death refuses to take him,” Flora said and pulled her arm free

of her husband's grasp and headed for the door.

Torin shook his head intending for the ghost to feel his wrath and grabbed his sword before leaving the room.

Flora stood still outside the bedchamber door, listening. "It is coming from above," she said when her husband joined her. "I have not explored that area yet. What is up there?"

"My mum's solar and the bedchamber I once occupied."

"Anything beyond that?" she asked, and he hesitated to respond. "What is it?"

"The tower room but it was sealed off," —he thought a moment— "My great-grandfather had it sealed off, but I do not know why."

Flora headed for the stairs, Torin shaking his head and stopping her with a hasty grab of her arm before she could put her foot on the first step.

"Remain behind me," he reminded firmly.

The moan came again but not as loudly.

"Aye, but hurry," she urged, stepping aside.

Torin grabbed a torch from a sconce nearest to him and issued his wife orders before taking another step. "Stay close to me."

It was then Flora spotted the sword. "Your weapon will do no good against a ghost."

"Aye, but it will if the ghost proves to be of flesh and blood."

Torin took the stairs cautiously not knowing what to expect around each curve and annoyed with himself for not even thinking that he should have ordered his wife to remain safe in their bedchamber. Or would she be? He had no idea of what was causing the strange sound in the keep and it was better he kept his wife with him than left her on her own. She would somehow manage to get into trouble.

When they reached the next landing, they heard the moan once again.

Torin had never explored the sound when it happened. He had been too busy seeing that people got safely out of the keep. And after a while, he simply had let the ghost lay claim. Now, however, he would tolerate no more and that was thanks to his wife and her tenacity.

“It still sounds like it is coming from above,” Flora said.

“You are cold,” Torin said, seeing his wife shiver.

“It grows colder as we go up,” she explained but paid it no mind. “Let’s have a look in the room to make sure nothing is there.” A quick glance proved no one hid there. “I will have it cleaned and life brought back to it.”

His wife was laying claim to every room, and he wondered if it was to show the ghost that he no longer belonged here.

The next room proved empty as well, thick dust covering most of it and once again his wife made a point of saying she would see to it being cleaned out.

“There is nothing more to see,” Torin said.

“The tower,” she reminded.

“It is not accessible,” he said.

The moan sounded again, though more faintly.

Flora pointed above her head. “It comes from above.”

The night would be completely ruined if he did not take her up there so she could see for herself, and so he climbed the stairs to satisfy her curiosity.

Flora stood staring at the door to the tower room that was now nothing but stone. “There must be a reason it was sealed off with stone.”

“I imagine there is, but I was told when asked that it mattered not and it was to always remain sealed, inaccessible,” Torin said.

“Are you not curious as to why the door was permanently sealed with stones?”

“I was but after a while I came to accept it and to follow what those had done before me... not access the room.”

Flora went to respond when a moan swept over them with a gust of wind so overpowering and cold that it had Flora turning to seek shelter against her husband. He was already reaching out to her, wrapping her tight against him, fighting against the wind that seemed to grow stronger until it blew with such force it sent them both tumbling... right down the stairs.

CHAPTER 16



Flora was silent the next morning as she ate breakfast with her husband and not because something disturbed her. It was the deep scowl on her husband's face that kept her from speaking. He was still upset with her over last night.

They had argued. Torin wanted to leave the keep and sleep in the cottage until the matter of the ghost could be settled. Flora had refused, insisting that if they left it would be unlikely that she could get any of the servants to return to the keep and pointed out other numerous problems that their departure from the keep would cause.

Finally, she had gotten into bed and refused to move, and she also claimed she was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to sleep. She had not been sure if she would sleep, but she had been sure that whatever pleasure she had looked forward to with her husband had vanished with their exchange of harsh words. Furthermore, she found herself upset over their altercation and how it had left her feeling. Her heart had pained her in an unusual way, something she had never felt before that moment and she did not want to feel again.

He had climbed into bed but kept his distance from her and surprisingly she had drifted off to sleep not long after. She had not been surprised when she woke to find herself in bed alone or to find her husband still annoyed with her when she had joined him for breakfast.

Arguments were not something Flora had experience with, debates being more to her liking. They made more sense and

gave each party a chance to present their opinion along with facts. It made for a much easier solution. Her da and mum had never fought, they debated, and Flora had not been surprised that her mum often won. Her mum had always presented a far more logical opinion than her da, or at least that had been Flora's conclusion.

This silence from her husband would not do and she finally turned to him. "I am sorry you did not see reason last night but remaining here was the wisest thing to do."

Torin dropped back in his chair and glared at her. "That is not the apology I expected, wife."

"It is not an apology. I have nothing to apologize for. I simply speak the truth since you are having a difficult time seeing it for yourself."

He shook his head and tapped his chest repeatedly. "I am your husband. You are to obey me."

Flora leaned closer to him, keeping her voice low to avoid any nearby servants from hearing them. "What kind of wife would I be if I did not point out your foolishness?"

He leaned closer to her as well. "Foolish or not, I am your husband and my word rules."

She stared at his lips, recalling his kisses and felt a tiny tingle rush over her. Curiosity had her running her finger over his lips. "I do so enjoy your kisses."

His shaft sprung to full alert, and he silently cursed it. "We are discussing foolishness, not kisses."

"We are all foolish one time or another. I would expect you to tell me when I am foolish so that I may correct my mistake, learn from it, and hopefully not make it again. And another thing, Torin, I will not tolerate arguing with you."

He was about to reprimand her for sounding as if it was a command, but her next words stopped him.

"I care for you, and I do not like how it makes me feel when we argue. I prefer we discuss things and if your point is valid, then I will admit it and bow to your word, but if my

point proves wiser, I expect you to be sensible enough to admit it.”

“You care for me?” Torin asked her words catching at his heart unexpectedly.

“Oddly enough, I find that I do, but then you have been good to me, patient with me, and tolerant of my chatter.” She continued talking as usual. “I also like the strength of your hand wrapped around mine, the feel of your arms around me, the way you tease with a smile, and I do not believe I will ever grow tired of your kisses.”

Her open and honest nature continued to startle him and please him as well. She always spoke directly to him, let her thoughts be known and without a hint of animosity or judgment. And bloody hell if she had not been right about remaining in the keep. He had fled once, and it would be unwise of him to do so again.

He could not help but ask. “How does our arguing make you feel?”

“Dreadful,” she said without giving it a second thought. “Debate or discuss an issue, but argue?” She shook her head and placed her hand on his arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I do not want to argue with you, Torin. Besides, arguing is pointless. It doesn’t get anyone anywhere and it creates more problems than it is worth.”

He took hold of her hand, liking the feel of it in his just as much as she liked having it there. “I would promise you that I would never argue with you again, but my foolishness,” —he grinned playfully— “rules sometimes, but I will do my best to keep it at bay.”

“I will remind you of it,” she said eagerly, no longer keeping her voice low.

“I am sure you will.”

“Do I offend you by doing that?” she asked, unsure of his response.

“Nay, not at all. Your wise words are always well-intended,” he assured her with a soft kiss.

“I am glad you realize that and glad you admit I was right about remaining in the keep last night.”

“When did I admit that?” he asked, wondering if she had heard his thoughts before quickly dismissing the absurd notion.

“When you remained in our bedchamber last night,” she said as if it explained it all but naturally, she continued to clarify. “You are a man of principle and if you had thought your decision right nothing would have stopped you from removing me from the keep. You would have had your way, but something warned you against it. Most likely it was the thought that you fled the keep once and would not do so again, a reasonable decision. Another wise decision on both our parts was not to attempt to couple since we were both upset with each other, and it would not have turned out well.”

She was right again. “Harsh words have a way of destroying the moment.”

Flora smiled, appearing pleased. “An easy solution... we will never fight.”

“There is not a married couple alive who do not fight, and even when dead some fight,” Kinnell said, laughing as he approached them.

“They cannot fight if they are dead,” Flora said, confused by his remark.

“Believe me, my lady, the way some of the surviving spouses curse their dead ones, I would not be surprised if they could not hear them,” Kinnell said, approaching the dais.

“A good argument can often help couples,” Iona suggested, following not far behind Kinnell.

“Aye, to kill a marriage,” Kinnell said with a laugh.

“Of course, you would think that,” Iona accused. “Men think women should hold their tongue and do as they say. How would you like it if you were forced to do that day after day?” Her hand shot up, stopping Kinnell from responding. “Do not tell me it is because men are wiser than women.”

Kinnell grinned. "It is good you already know it, now I do not have to explain it to you."

"You are a pompous idiot," Iona snapped.

Kinnell laughed again. "But a wise man."

"You both remind me of a couple my parents were friends with, Lord Simon Granfield and his wife, Lady Adare," Flora said. "They bickered endlessly before they realized they loved each other and finally wed. Unfortunately, they had wasted so much time bickering they lost years they could have spent together. She died unexpectedly after only five years of marriage, and he was devastated. He retreated from the world, spending his time in studies and talks with my da. You should not waste time. You should love each other while you can."

Torin smiled at Kinnell. "You did say my wife was observant."

Flora turned a smile on her husband. "My da would be pleased to hear that you recognized that and that he had succeeded in teaching me to be observant." She looked to Kinnell and Iona. "It is good that neither of you jumped to deny that love exists between you, a sign that clearly shows you have feelings for each other."

Kinnell and Iona both were ready to deny it, but both fell silent and stared as if not knowing what to say.

"Did something bring both of you here?" Torin asked to quell the awkward moment.

Kinnell turned to Torin. "It's Walsh."

Iona spoke before Kinnell could say more. "He helps as many in the village as he can."

"And asks endless questions as he does," Kinnell said.

"And that means he is trouble?" Iona asked with a glare at Kinnell.

"It means he's digging for something," Kinnell clarified.

"He is too curious?" Torin asked, concerned.

"Far too curious," Kinnell confirmed.

“Discussing the weather, hunting, fishing, and talk of the ghost makes him far too curious?” Iona asked.

“He inquired about the ghost?” Flora asked.

“He did not need to. Talk of the ghost is a daily topic in the village,” Iona said, and her face lit with a smile. “Tongues wagged happily this morning when all learned the lord and his lady remained in the keep last night undisturbed.”

“Aye, we had a pleasant night,” Flora said.

Torin was glad she kept what happened last night between them or tongues would be wagging with alarm.

“Aye, a very pleasant night and more to come,” Torin said to make it known the lord and his lady now occupied the keep permanently.

“The news will be received with great relief,” Kinnell said. “Some matters have been brought to my attention to discuss with you, my lord. Do you have time now to see to them?”

Flora turned to her husband. “Your solar was finished yesterday and is ready for use.”

“You truly have brought the keep back to life, wife, and I thank you for it,” Torin said and kissed his wife’s cheek. “You will be working in the keep today?”

“Aye, there is still much to do,” she said.

“Until later,” Torin said and kissed her cheek again.

Flora turned to Iona as the two men walked off. “I often speak the obvious, at least what is obvious to me, and unfortunately, at times without thinking. I did not mean to offend you by suggesting that you and Kinnell care for each other.”

“You only saw what is there, my lady,” Iona admitted. “I have favored Kinnell since I first laid eyes on him, but I have a bold nature and an even bolder tongue that most men dislike. He is a fine-looking man and favored by many women. He argued with me from the start, a sure sign of disfavor, or so I thought.”

Flora chuckled. “Lord Simon and his wife Adare did the same. It was my da who pointed out that Adare’s beauty intimidated Simon since he was a plain-featured man and thought Adare would never be interested in him. So, he argued with her out of frustration and disappointment instead of taking a chance with her. It was what got Simon to stop arguing and talk with her. They were wed shortly after that.”

“I do not know if we could ever stop arguing. It seems to be the way between us,” Iona said.

“Then perhaps you should tell him how you feel and see what he says.”

“While I have a bold nature and tongue, it terrifies me to think of doing that,” Iona admitted. “If he does not feel the same as I do what then?”

“You will waste no more time thinking about him,” Flora advised.

“Aye, it might be worth it just for that since he is forever on my mind.” Iona shook her head. “Excuse me, my lady, but I must take my leave. There may be people at my cottage who need me. Unfortunately, I got caught up arguing with Kinnell and followed him here without thinking. Thank you for your truthful and kind words, and I am at your service whenever needed.”

Flora jumped up. “I could use a walk before starting my day here in the keep. I will go with you.” She did not reveal to Iona the true reason she walked with her... to visit Philip and see what he knew, being the eldest in the clan, of the tower room.

A cold wind nipped at Flora’s face as she stepped outside with Iona, and she quickly drew her hood up over her head. They chatted as they walked and stopped to chat with other women along the way.

“You have not been here that long, my lady, but it is obvious to see that the clan favors you and are relieved you are approachable and that you show such interest in the

Highlands,” Iona said as they approached her cottage to see a couple of people waiting for her.

“I am glad to hear that, Iona, now you must go and see to those in need,” Flora said and thought over Iona’s remark as she walked away.

She never had many friends, her interests far different from other young woman. While they focused on making good marriages, she focused on gaining knowledge, something she continued to do here. She wanted to learn all she could about life in the Highlands and asked questions of everyone she talked with, and all were only too pleased to talk with her. Strangely enough, she was beginning to feel a part of the clan, a part of a family, and that truly pleased her.

She tapped on Philip’s door and the elderly man opened it, his eyes turning wide surprised to see her there.

“My lady, how may I help you?” Philip asked.

“I have a question I was hoping you could help me with. Would it be all right if I came in and we talked a bit?”

Philip stepped back, opening the door wide. “Of course, my lady. How rude of me not to invite you in.”

“Nonsense, Philip. I surprised you with my visit,” Flora said as she stepped inside.

His cottage was small, sufficient for only one person, but it was warm and smelled quite pleasant.

“Please sit, my lady,” Philip said, pointing to the only bench in the room.

Flora spotted a small stool near the hearth and went to it. “You sit on the bench, Philip, while I warm myself by the fire.”

He stood where he was for a moment, a bit stunned, but once she sat on the stool, he leaned his hand on the table to help lower himself to the bench.

“How may I help you, my lady?”

“I wondered if you knew anything about why the tower room was sealed with stone?” she asked. Having considered his age she thought there was a possibility that he would know not only when but why the room was sealed.

“I was far too young to know anything about it and my memory is not what it once was.”

“Who ruled when this happened?” Flora asked, though her husband had mentioned it, he had shared no knowledge of his great-grandfather.

“That would have been Lord Dermid, Lord Torin’s great-grandda.”

“Was he a good ruler?” Flora asked.

Philip hesitated. “He was a strong man and he ruled with strength. No one dared oppose him. He kept the clan safe.”

“So, Lord Dermid was a tyrant,” she said, his remark painting the man more clearly than he intended.

“I-I-I did not say that, my lady,” Philip said anxiously.

She realized she had upset him and hurried to reassure him. “Nay, you did not. I assumed it since if a person is rarely opposed it is usually out of fear.”

“That is true, my lady,” Philip said, nodding and confirming her suspicion without actually admitting it.

“How was Lord Hamish as a ruler?”

Philip broke out in a smile. “He was a good and fair ruler much like his grandson, Lord Torin. His grandfather taught him well.”

“Not so his da, Lord Evander?” she asked.

“Lord Evander was not well liked,” Philip said and offered no more.

“The people must have favored Lord Hamish.”

“Tears were shed freely the day he died, and hearts grieved.” He wiped away a couple of tears that fell from his eyes.

Flora saw that she had dredged up sorrowful memories for the elderly man and that was never her intention. She knew all too well how memories could hurt. Any more questions she had could wait for another day.

She stood and Philip hurried to stand as well. “Thank you so much, Philip. You have been extremely helpful, and I do appreciate it. We will talk again if you do not mind. I wish to learn all I can about the Highlands and Clan Norham, and with your aged-wisdom I believe there is much I can learn from you.”

“I do not mind at all, my lady. I would very much enjoy speaking with you again.”

“Wonderful, then I will visit with you again,” Flora said as she walked to the door.

Philip hurried to the door to open it for her.

“One thing, Philip,” Flora said, stopping at the door. “You say you were young at the time, but by any chance would you recall who made use of the tower room or what it was used for?”

Philip spoke barely above a whisper. “Torture, my lady. It was where Lord Dermid tortured people, or so rumors say.”

CHAPTER 17



“*W*here have you been?” Torin demanded as Flora approached the keep. He did not wait for an answer, he turned to Kinnell. “Find out why the warriors failed to keep a watch on her.” He took brisk steps to his wife. “How can you just disappear in the village?”

“I was visiting with Philip,” she said, stopping when he got close to her.

“I have been looking for you, first in the keep, then at Iona’s, and after that you simply vanished. I feared you were snatched away from me,” he said, his arm going around her waist to hold on to her, fearing she might vanish again, and the thought terrified him.

“I did not mean to upset you, but I was curious to know what, if anything, Philip knew about the tower room. He is the oldest clan member that I am aware of, and I thought he might have some knowledge of the incident that caused the room to be closed off.” Before Torin could say anything, she went right on talking. “Did you know the tower room was the torture room?”

“The tower of torture is what some called it according to my da, who laughed when I learned of it and confronted him with the disturbing news. He told me it was nothing but gossip and all I needed to know was that the room was to be kept sealed.”

“Aren’t you curious as to what is behind that sealed door?” Flora asked.

“I admit there are times I am tempted to unseal it. After all, it has been a long time since my great-grandda had it sealed, and I wonder... would it matter now after all this time and with my great-grandda gone these many years now?”

Flora nodded. “But you wonder if you dishonor your great-grandda by not adhering to his word even after all these years.”

“Aye, which is why the room remains sealed... at least for now,” Torin said, leaving room for the possibility that he may decide otherwise.

“I understand, though my curiosity yearns to know what it contains, but this decision belongs solely to you. However,” — Flora smiled— “if you do not mind, I will continue to ask questions in regard to the tower room.”

Torin laughed lightly. “You will ask questions regardless of whether I give permission or not. It is simply your way, wife, though I do not mind if you do. Your inquires may actually help solve the mystery of the tower room without opening the room.”

“We think alike, husband,” Flora said, pleased that they did. “If I can gather enough information, I may be able to determine why the room was sealed.”

“I honestly would not mind knowing, so ask your questions of whoever you wish, though you are right about Philip. He is the oldest person in the clan and would know the most. But for now, you will go to the keep and stay there since I do not want to worry about you while I leave the isle for a few hours.”

“What adventure do you go on? Perhaps I should go with you,” she said eagerly.

“You have enough to keep you busy here and it is no adventure. Another campsite has been spotted in the woods off the isle. I go to see what it may tell me.”

“You go to investigate. I could help,” she said, her eyes shifting past him, spotting two clerics entering the village.

Torin saw that his wife's attention had been diverted and gave a quick glance and explanation. "They were sent from the monastery to see to a proper burial for the cleric and I intend to ask them to bless the keep while here. Now, please take pity on your husband and go into the keep and stay there until I return."

"That is wise of you to have them bless the keep. The scroll did advise that when dealing with ghosts," she said. "And worry not, I do not wish to cause you undo concern. I will remain in the keep until your return."

She did not know why she got the overpowering urge to kiss him, but she did, and she gave in to it. Her lips touched his gently and lingered just enough to let him know she wished for more.

As she eased her lips off his, she whispered, "I look forward to tonight with you, husband."

Torin's arm tightened around her waist. "It is not good to tempt me in front of others since you have me rising to the occasion."

Flora looked at him oddly for a moment, not sure what he meant, then she smiled. "Oh, I understand what you mean." She gave him a quick hug. "You help me gain knowledge. You truly are a good husband." She stepped away from him. "I am off to the keep to see that more work gets done and you must be careful and return to me safely." She hurried off with a wave and a smile.

Torin caught several villagers smiling and nodding at him and women whispering to each other, smiling as they did. His clan was pleased with his choice of a wife and so was he. He went to turn and saw that his wife suddenly stopped and turned, her eyes not on him. She looked past him at the two cleric's walking with their heads down and their hoods pulled down over their heads, hiding most of their face.

One turned his head her way and she started walking toward the pair.

Torin headed toward his wife, thinking something was amiss with the way she stared so oddly at the pair. That was when he saw the one cleric slowly slip his hand out from the large sleeve of his robe.

Torin did not hesitate... he let out a roar and ran.

Torin's roar brought Flora to an abrupt halt and turned to see her husband running toward her, then she turned quickly back to look at the cleric and saw the dagger. Instinct had her turning and running toward her husband.

The cleric also let out a roar as he ran toward Flora, raising his dagger, ready to plunge it into her.

The cleric was near on top of Flora when Torin reached her and with a quick shove, he sent his wife tumbling to the ground and the blade headed straight for his chest. His hand was quick to grab the cleric's wrist and as Torin threw himself against him, he gave his wrist a hard twist and felt the dagger plunge into the cleric as they toppled to the ground.

Torin was off the cleric in an instant, a quick glance confirmed he was dead. Another quick glance found the other cleric on the ground dead, Walsh standing over him, a bloody sword in his hand. He turned and rushed to his wife.

Flora was sitting up, a wince on her face and her hand at her hip.

"I hurt you," Torin said, silently cursing himself as he bent down beside her to slip his arm around her.

"Nay, it is the bruise that has yet to heal from my last fall," she said. "You took wise action, husband, but then I knew you would, that was why I ran to you. You are far better able to protect me against an attack than I am in protecting myself. Though, I believe it wise that you do not wait in teaching me how to defend myself as you had suggested." She grabbed his arm and leaned forward to get to her feet.

Torin tightened his arm around her and lifted her to her feet.

"Are you unharmed, my lady?" Kinnell asked when he reached them.

“Aye, I am good, Kinnell.”

“Tell me,” Torin ordered, angry that his wife once again came near to losing her life and here on home soil where she should not have to fear anything.

“They are both dead. Walsh killed the other one. He was close by and did not hesitate to help. Some of the warriors were quick to respond to your roar but were too far away to reach you in time.”

“No one, not one single soul is permitted to cross that bridge unless I give permission,” Torin ordered, keeping his wife tucked firm against him.

Kinnell shook his head. “No one gave thought to the clerics.”

“They were not clerics,” Flora said. “Their belts were different. If they were from the same monastery, their attire would be identical. It is a rule that must be followed in the monasteries.”

“Is that why you were headed their way?” Torin asked.

Flora went to explain and stopped a moment. “I see your point. It would have been wiser of me to tell you what I surmised instead of going to speak to the two men. I should have thought better of it since I also questioned why a monastery that cast out a cleric would care if he was properly buried and how did they find out he had died in the first place.” She looked from her husband to Kinnell. “Did either of you send word to the monastery?”

“Bloody hell,” Torin said never having thought of it.

Kinnell shook his head, annoyed himself.

Flora shook her head as well. “The bigger question though is why does someone want me dead?”

* * *

FLORA SAT in the Great Hall, her hands cupped around a tankard soaking in the heat of the chamomile brew. She had

sustained a chill from sitting on the snow-covered ground and needed to warm herself. What warmed her more, though, was the laughter she heard and the smiles she saw when she had entered the Great Hall. There was a contentment and joy in the keep that had not been felt for an awfully long time and she had not been the only one to have restored it. It had been her husband as well. He had shown his clan strength and that in turn had encouraged them to do the same. The Clan Norham had needed uniting, and they were now engaged in doing just that.

Torin finished talking with Kinnell and joined his wife at the table closest to the hearth after sending the man off to carry out his orders.

“Are you still chilled?” Torin asked and seeing that her hands still trembled, he was about to grab her cloak left on the bench to drape over her shoulders when she stopped him.

“I prefer your body’s warmth. It chases the chill much faster.”

Her remark stirred him, but then it had not taken much lately for him to grow aroused around her. That he was attracted to her was undeniable but what also was undeniable was how much he cared for her.

He sat next to her and before he could tuck her tight against him, she settled against him, tucking herself as close as she could, and his arm wrapped tightly around her.

“You had no answer for me when I asked why someone would want me dead,” she said, content in the safety of his arms and the warmth of his body.

“I suppose it is because I do not want to think of why that might be,” he admitted.

“That it is someone who wishes to hurt you?” she asked. “It would be the most logical conclusion since I have not been here long enough in the Highlands to make enemies or for anyone to know me. It would then seem reasonable to believe that it had more to do with you than me.”

“On that we agree, wife.”

Flora wished to ask more but Walsh entered the room, and she held her tongue.

“You wish to see me, my lord?” Walsh asked, stopping in front of their table.

“Aye, Walsh. I am appreciative of your quick action in helping me a short time ago. Tell me about it,” Torin said. “I am searching for clues as to who these men might be.”

“That’s easy. They are mercenaries,” Walsh said and sat on the bench opposite them at the table before given permission to do so.

“You know that for sure?” Torin asked more concerned by what he knew than by his lack of manners.

“I have seen them around some mercenary camps. They worked for whoever provided the most coin. They are some of the worst of the lot which means more will follow when it is learned they failed at the mission.”

“The coin must be substantial for this mission if three have attempted it so far, though how the two men posing as clerics thought to get away with it holds no logic,” Torin said.

“Their plan went awry when Lady Flora approached them,” Walsh explained with a nod to Flora. “No doubt they planned to befriend her, kill her, and be off the isle before they were discovered,” Walsh said.

Anger fired in Torin thinking how easily he could have lost his wife.

“How is it you did not hear of this mission?” Flora asked.

His wife had asked what he had intended to ask.

“I was busy with the woman I told you about and when I finally left there, the others were far ahead of me.”

“Would you have taken on the mission?” Torin asked, knowing his wife would ask it if he didn’t.

“That would have depended on the price, though with two attempts so close together I assume the payment is substantial and would have tempted me,” Walsh said. “And before you

pass judgment, know that it is the only way I know to survive this unforgiving land and those who rule here.”

“That is a poor excuse,” Torin accused.

“Look at the side from which I live it, then tell that to me,” Walsh said, a glow of anger in his eyes.

“My da often argued that you cannot judge another if you have not experienced what they have, while some of his friends thought those who lacked common sense could never be elevated, while others assumed it was the lack of reason that prevented any gain. They would debate it endlessly,” Flora said.

“And what do you believe, my lady?” Walsh asked.

“I believe the answer is elusive, for there are far too many variables to provide a distinct answer, including what life itself throws at a person, thus proving it senseless to constantly chase after an answer that does not exist.”

“Is that all you can tell us of these men?” Torin asked, turning talk back to the matter at hand, not wanting his wife conversing so easily with the man since he did not know if he could be trusted. Though, he had to admit her response to Walsh held wisdom.

“That is all I know,” Walsh said.

Torin doubted that but he would continue to have him watched.

“You should go inspect those campsites,” Flora said after Walsh was gone. “No doubt they belonged to the clerics.” She rested her hand over his on the table. “My duties will keep me in the keep. I am eager to work on the room you allowed me to have for myself.”

He slipped his hand from beneath hers and locked fingers with her. “Until this matter is settled you must be wise in who you trust. There is no telling who is involved with this plot to take you from me.”

Flora shook her head. “Is there anyone who would not want you to wed?”

“Just the opposite, the clan was growing tired of waiting for me to wed and produce an heir. Unless there is an outside source who plots to steal the Isle of Outerson from me.” The possibility had Torin saying, “I will send some men to make inquires.” And hoping the two men he had already sent on a seeking mission would return with news.

“You should go before the hour grows late and you return late to the keep,” Flora said with a soft smile.

“Nothing will keep you from me tonight,” Torin said and kissed her lightly. “Absolutely nothing.”

CHAPTER 18



Flora glanced around the room. It was coming along but there was still much to be done. She had placed a narrow table in the middle of the room, plus a bench. Anwen had been much help, having known exactly where to take her in the keep when she inquired about a piece of furniture. It would take time to arrange the room just as she wanted it but little by little, she would see it done.

“My lady, it grows late, and the servants will soon take their leave,” Anwen said, placing two wood bowls on the table.

“Night has fallen?” Flora asked with concern.

“Aye, my lady.”

“Has Lord Torin returned?” Flora asked anxiously, too occupied to have paid attention to time.

“Nay, my lady, Lord Torin has yet to return.

“I wonder what keeps him?” she said, concern poking at her and growing as various possibilities filled her head.

“The tracker could have found something, and they followed it,” Anwen said. “Perhaps you should wait in the cottage for his lordship’s return, my lady.”

Flora shook her head mostly to chase away the endless, disturbing possibilities of what could have befallen her husband. “I will be fine in the keep alone.”

Anwen hesitated, as if she might hold her tongue, but rushed to say, “I can remain with you if you wish, my lady.”

“That is very thoughtful of you, Anwen, especially since I know the thought of spending a night here frightens you. I assure you that I will be fine. Worry not.”

The idea of spending time alone in the keep did not frighten her, but not knowing what was happening to her husband did frighten her. It also troubled her heart. She was growing far too accustomed to being with him and she did not like the thought of being without him.

“Shall I have food sent to your bedchamber before I take my leave?” Anwen asked.

“Aye,” Flora said, nodding. “I am sure my husband will be hungry when he arrives home.”

She returned to working in the room, but not for long, her mind unable to concentrate. She made her way to the Great Hall in time to bid the servants good night. Some flashed worried glances her way, others seemed reluctant to leave her alone but also reluctant to stay.

Flora grabbed her cloak and swung it around her shoulders.

“You have changed your mind,” Anwen said with a smile of relief. “I can have supper brought to the cottage.”

Flora hurried to shake her head. “Nay, Anwen, I only wish to step outside a moment before retiring to my bedchamber.”

A mix of disappointment and worry marred Anwen’s face as she followed Lady Flora outside. “Are you sure you want to remain here, my lady?”

“I am sure,” Flora said, seeing that a flurry of snow was falling.

“That is not a wise idea.”

Flora and Anwen turned to see Walsh standing near the bottom of the stairs.

“There is nothing to fear in the keep,” Flora said confidently.

“You do not know that for sure,” Walsh argued.

“My husband will return soon,” Flora said, remaining confident.

Walsh continued his objection. “You do not know that for sure either.”

Flora did not intend to argue or debate with the man. “Either way, I remain in the keep tonight. Good night.” Her dismissal had them both turning and walking away, talking as they did.

Flora stared off in the distance as a light snow fell around her. Worry took hold and she knew she would not rest easily until her husband returned to her. She entered the keep and made her way up to their bedchamber.

Food and drink awaited her. She would wait for her husband to eat, though she had some wine and nibbled on bread and cheese to quell her grumbling stomach.

Her eyes soon grew heavy. She was tired from the long day and her body ached some from the fall. She glanced at the bed, its appeal too much to deny. She stood and slipped off her garments and hurried into a soft wool nightdress.

She smiled once under the warm wool blankets, satisfied she would be where her husband would want her and where she wanted to be. In no time her eyes closed, and she was sound asleep.

Flora did not know what startled her awake. It was no nightmare or dream that woke her, she had simply found herself awake. The fire still burned brightly as did the candles, so she could not have been asleep that long. She was alone in the room, so what had woken her?

She felt a sudden tickle at the back of her neck and hurried a glance around the empty room to see the door, she had not fully closed, begin to open slowly. Fear struck her for a moment, then she quickly got out of bed and grabbed one of the weapons her husband kept in the room... a dagger... which of course she did not know how to use.

She stepped softly toward the door, planning to stand behind it and surprise whoever was there. Before she reached

it, it swung open, a powerful moan sweeping in on the wind blowing all the candles out in the room and sending the fire's flames dancing wildly.

A chill ran over her turning her skin to gooseflesh and she hugged herself. Was it a ghost who moaned or was it nothing more than the wind making its way through the castle? What would her da do in such a situation? Examine both possibilities.

She called out, "How can I help you?"

The wind along with the moan drifted out of the room and she followed after it.

* * *

"WE SHOULD CAMP. It grows dark and this snow could turn heavy," Kinnell said.

"All the more reason to return home," Torin said. "Besides, it concerns me greatly that not one, but two campsites were found and from what we saw more than two men had camped there. Someone intends to see my wife dead and I have no idea who or why. What benefit would my wife's death be to anyone?"

"We find out that, then we find out who it is," Kinnell said.

"Make sure the men keep a keen eye on Walsh," Torin ordered. "He could have purposely killed that other mercenary so he could not tell us anything. He also could be waiting for the right time to carry out his mission and make his escape. See he is kept away from my wife."

"The men keep an eye on him," Kinnell assured him.

Torin heard the crack of a branch followed by another, then it grew quiet, much too quiet. He let out a roar as he pulled his sword from its sheath just as several warriors emerged from the woods their battle roars echoing through the trees as they charged at Torin and his small troop.

The battle did not last long to Torin's surprise and suspicion, the men who attacked running off, not finishing the fight.

"Bloody hell," Torin said, wiping his blood-stained sword on a dead man's chest as he surveyed the damage.

Only two men lay dead, and neither were his men. All his men were unharmed.

"Why attack and run?" Kinnell asked, shaking his head.

Torin's eyes sparked with anger, and he called out, "Get to your horses, we head home." He threw Kinnell a quick look. "It was meant to delay us, giving someone time to breach the bridge."

He need not say anymore, Kinnell and the others understood... someone was trying to make it to the keep knowing Lord Torin was not there. Torches were quickly lit, and a quick pace set for home.

Fear twisted at Torin's stomach that he would be too late. That somehow a man would make his way unnoticed into the village, the dark night his cover, then into the keep to find his wife and kill her. The thought sent a fury racing through him, and he raised his torch to cast a wider light and picked up his pace.

When he finally spotted the bridge, his heart pounded against his chest seeing far too many torches not only at the start of the bridge but at the end as well. Something was not right, and he prayed he was not too late.

* * *

FLORA FELT the wind at her bare feet as if urging her up the stairs and she followed slowly, cautiously, worried what might await her around each curve in the staircase, though she knew in her heart where it was taking her... to the tower room.

A torch burned low in the sconce there, and she did not recall having ordered it lit, though her husband could have, a more plausible conclusion.

The wind turned soft and moved up around her ankles as if shackling her there. She shook her head. It was nothing more than a wind that ran through the keep, coming somewhere from within the tower room. No doubt after all these years the windows' shutters had decayed and fallen off the windows leaving the wind to rip through the windows and along the stone and down through the keep making it sound like a moan.

It was a reasonable explanation and if the shutters were restored, she believed it just might solve the ghost problem.

In case she was wrong, she decided to continue her one-sided communication with the supposed ghost.

"I will help you however I can if only I knew what you wanted me to do," she said.

After a few minutes of silence, she shook her head at her own foolishness and turned to go. That was when she heard the strange noise. She was not sure what it was, so she listened more closely and that's when it caught her eye.

She looked closer to see that a corner of one of the stones, about her height, which sealed the door was crumbling, the pieces falling to the floor. She stared in disbelief, to her the answer was clear.

"You want the door unsealed," she said, and the torch suddenly blew out.

She had not expected a response, but she got one.

That was enough for one night for Flora and she eased herself along the wall to help safely guide her in the dark and down along the stairs, her heart pounding madly and her feet icy from the cold stones, to get to the next floor where a torch would light her way.

With relief she made it to her bedchamber when she heard footfalls pounding in a rush up the stairs. Was it her husband? Dare she call out? What if it wasn't? What if someone had gotten in the keep and meant her harm?

She hurried into the room and hid behind the door, the dagger tight in her hand. The pounding footfalls drew closer

and closer. When they approached the door to rush in, she raised the dagger ready to strike.

Her wrist was grabbed and her back slammed against a hard chest.

“Let a man get a dagger from you, and you are doomed, wife,” Torin scolded. “He yanked the dagger from her hand and tossed it aside. “Now you are mine to do with whatever I please.”

Flora understood he was letting her know what could happen if she failed to use the dagger correctly, but she wanted him to know that dagger or not...

“You are the only man who I will ever allow to touch me intimately,” Flora said.

“Situations can prove otherwise,” he said, turning her to face him. “By now you would have the dagger plunged in your chest or your throat sliced, that is if he didn’t decide to force himself on you first.”

“Then tell me what I did wrong, so if I find myself in a similar situation, I know what to do.”

Torin moved her to stand behind the door, though closer to the front edge of the door. “You stay still, not a sound or a movement, and wait for the culprit to pass the door, his back to you. Then you do not hesitate, you jam the dagger into his back with as much force as you can, then run. Do not hesitate. Run as fast as you can since the wound may not disable him. The situation will depend on whether you find help or hide. Whatever you do, you stay alive until I can reach you. Be brave but do not be foolish.”

Flora had listened to his every word intently as her eyes remained fixed on his face. She loved his fine features, but tonight there was a harshness to them and a strength she had seen once before, and the memory startled her.

She grabbed his arm. “You were attacked?”

“How did you know?”

“Your face holds a harshness I have seen only one other time—when we were attacked on the way here and you raised your sword in battle.” She began to pat his arms and chest fearful he had suffered a wound. “You were not harmed, were you? Others as well? Kinnell? He is unharmed?”

“All is well, wife,” he assured her, taking her into his arms. “It was a ruse that met with failure. The troop was meant to be delayed so two men could sneak onto the isle and enter unnoticed.”

“They were caught?” she asked excited. “They can provide much information.”

“Unfortunately, they drowned in the loch. The guards heard cries for help but could not reach them on time. Besides, the water is far too cold this time of year for anyone to take such a foolish chance.”

Flora wrapped her arms around her husband and planted herself tight against him in a hug. “I am glad you are safe.”

Torin closed his arms around her tight as well, relishing the feel of her tucked safe against him. His relief had been great when he discovered what had happened to the two men. But to be cautious, he had ordered more sentinels and a search of the isle at dawn to make certain no other men had been successful in reaching the isle, though certain they would have met the same end as the two dead men. Then he had hurried here, eager to see his wife and know she was safe.

Flora raised her head and Torin wasted no time in kissing her. It was strange that he had yet to be intimate with his wife and yet he felt as if he knew her intimately. But it was time, time for them to finally seal their vows and truly become husband and wife.

Flora stared at him when their kiss ended, looking a bit puzzled.

“Something wrong?” Torin asked, wondering over her confused look.

“I believe I have fallen in love with you,” she said even more puzzled. “My mum talked with me about it, though

warned that love was not easily explained or understood. To her, it was one of life's great mysteries and feeling what I do now and not understanding it, I finally understand what she meant. Though it truly is difficult to make sense of it, and yet it is the most wonderful feeling—”

Torin silenced her with a kiss, a powerful one that was quick to ignite his already sparked passion. Robbed of breath when done, he struggled a bit to say, “I love you as well, wife.” He waited a moment for his breath to calm before he continued. “Though, how that came about when you talk so much, I will never know, nor will I ever know how I came to love your chatter and missed it while I was gone these last few hours.”

Flora's heart filled with joy, and she chuckled. “And you are learning to chatter just as much as I do.”

Torin's eyes turned wide. “Good Lord, you're right.”

She snuggled against his chest, relishing this special moment, wanting to keep it in her heart and memory forever.

Torin scooped her up in his arms and walked toward the bed. “We have waited long enough and have been delayed long enough. It is time that we officially become husband and wife.”

CHAPTER 19



“*I* know nothing of coupling,” Flora said, though she had already made it known to him, she felt the need to remind him after he placed her on her feet by the bed.

“No need to worry, wife, we do not couple... we make love,” he said and kissed her lips gently.

His words sent a catch to her heart and a tantalizing sensation racing through her, flaring her already ignited passion.

“I do not want to disappoint you, Torin,” she said.

With a bare shake of his head, he said, “You will never disappoint me, Flora, no matter the circumstances.” He winked playfully. “Besides, I look forward to tutoring you in all aspects of making love.”

She smiled. “I look forward to every lesson.”

They kissed again and afterwards Torin was quick to slip off the only garment his wife wore, then discarded his own garments as fast as he could.

“I should familiarize myself with your body,” Flora said, reaching out to run her hands over his chest. It was somewhat of an excuse since she was eager to touch him, run her hands over all of him and get to know him intimately.

Torin’s shaft sprung to full attention as her hands stroked his body and she was quick to reach for it. He was about to stop her, fearful their evening would end too soon if she

touched him, then stopped. He wanted her comfortable with him and eager to touch him anytime she chose to.

“I do love the feel of you,” she said, stroking him gently.

“I am glad that you do,” he said, her innocent touch arousing him far too much. He brushed her hand away gently and was about to scoop her up and place her on the bed when a sudden knock at the door startled them both.

“We found one barely alive,” Kinnell called out. “He does not have much time.”

Torin wanted to punch someone he was so angry that they were yet again interrupted. His wife, however, was already rushing into her garments.

“We will be right there,” Flora called out.

“I wait in the Great Hall,” Kinnell said, and footfalls were heard rushing off.

Flora turned excited eyes on her husband. “Hurry, we must see what he can tell us before it is too late.”

Torin donned his garments knowing she was right, but angry over it anyway, and after grabbing their cloaks, he rushed out the room with his wife.

“Where is he?” Torin demanded when he and Flora entered the Great Hall.

“Iona’s cottage,” Kinnell said. “She is doing what she can to keep him alive, but she fears he does not have much time and urged me to fetch you.”

“Wise of her,” Flora said as they left the keep.

Several torches flared brightly as they made their way through the village and many men mulled about talking while a preponderance of warriors stood guard throughout. Flora realized her husband had taken extreme measures to keep her safe.

The man was having difficulty breathing when Torin and Flora stood beside the bed where he lay. He was soaked

through, his skin still wet from his time in the loch and now the bedding as well.”

“He rambles, not knowing what he is saying,” Iona said. “The cold has taken hold. I cannot get him warm fast enough.”

Torin bent over the man. “Who wants Flora dead?”

“Much coin. Much coin,” the man rambled.

“Who pays you this coin?” Torin asked.

The man’s eyes turned wide and struggled to say, “Giant. Giant pulled me out.”

“Who pays the coin?” Torin tried again, knowing the man made no sense thinking the giant helped him.

“Go home. Go home.” A tear trickled from one eye as he barely managed to say, “I want to go home.” He suddenly turned silent, and his breathing turned shallow.

“He will say no more. His time draws near,” Iona said.

“I will have him placed with the others when it is done,” Kinnell said.

“Were there signs of another where he was found?” Flora asked.

“Darkness and more men helping than needed would cover any tracks another may have left,” Kinnell said.

“Make certain the men stay alert. There could be more who attempted to reach the isle and they are not going to stop if there is substantial coin involved,” Torin said.

Flora reached for her husband’s hand as soon as they both left the cottage and met his hand that had done the same... reached out for hers. She was relieved when his hand locked around hers and she clung tightly to it.

“Why would anyone offer good coin for my life?” Flora asked, confused. “It makes no sense. What benefit could my death have to anyone?” She turned her head to him. “Who gains the title and leads the clan if anything happens to you?”

“Whatever heir I have.”

“And if there is no heir, who then inherits?” she asked.

“The very reason I needed to wed... to produce an heir and secure the title. Otherwise, the clan feared who might get the title and lead.”

“So, you are saying you do not know who that might be?” she asked.

“My da feared a distant relative of my mum’s might try and claim the title if there was no heir or the king might appoint someone to the title. It infuriated him to think that might happen and urged me to wed and produce an heir. He warned me on his deathbed to see it done and not suffer the shame of being the Norham who lost the clan.”

“Someone could have his eye on Clan Norham and getting me out of the way before I can produce an heir would be a wise move,” she suggested.

“More a foolish one,” Torin argued. “I would search him down and see him quartered and hanged. But enough talk of this, wife, we have a more important matter to see to.” He hurried her along to the keep and up to their bedchamber.

Once Torin secured the latch, he turned and found her rushing out of her garments.

“Hurry before we are interrupted again,” she urged. “I am eager for my first lesson.”

Torin stripped his garments off as he walked toward her. He scooped her up after they were both naked. “Lesson number one... enjoy!”

He sat her in the middle of the bed and said, “Spread your legs.”

When she did, he joined her on the bed, sitting opposite her, sliding his spread legs beneath hers and with his hands resting on her waist, he lifted her just enough to set her close enough for his hard shaft to poke between her legs.

“Now we get to touch each other,” he said, and his hands traveled up from her waist to gently cup her full breasts.

She let out a small, sudden gasp when his thumbs began to rub at her nipples, and it turned into a moan of its own accord as the tip of his shaft poked at her, sending tingles of pleasure shooting through her.

Instinct had her hands latching onto his upper arms needing the support, even more so when his lips replaced his hands at one breast. She gripped his arms tighter when his tongue swirled around her nipple, then he tugged at it lightly with his teeth before suckling on it. He soon did the same to the other one, lingering to feast on them both.

When he finished, he brought his face close to hers as his hand drifted down her body. “Did you like that, wife?”

“Aye!” she called out louder than intended as his finger slipped inside her.

“You’re going to like this even more,” he said, and his thumb stroked her while he slipped his finger out of her and another finger joined in to bring her pleasure.

“Ohhhh!” she said.

“You are so wet and ready for me,” he whispered.

A bit of clarity broke through her passion-filled senses, and she dropped her hand off his arm to slip down and take hold of his shaft that had grown even harder and more powerful. And when his thumb fell away from her, she replaced it with the tip of his shaft, rubbing it against her sweet spot with great delight.

This time the moan came from Torin, and he rested his brow to hers, letting her enjoy herself as his fingers added to her pleasure.

He kissed her between both their moans and when his name fell pleading from her lips, he pushed her to rest on her back and climbed over her, easing his shaft slightly inside her.

“Hold on to me,” he said.

Flora did not hesitate, she gripped his arms tight and whispered on a rushed breath, “Hurry!”

He felt as eager as she did, but he did not want to hurt her. He wanted her first time a memory she would always cherish just as he would, for this moment would seal them together forever.

“Hurry! Hurry!” she urged, lifting her hips to welcome him.

Her eager cries excited him even more and he slipped farther into her until he could not hold himself back any longer and plunged into her swiftly. She cried out and he silently cursed himself thinking he had hurt her but when he saw a smile spread across her face and felt her hips press hard against his, he smiled as well and drove into her over and over again.

“Ohhhh!” she cried out, the pleasure building and consuming her until she thought she would explode, and she did.

“TORIN!”

Her screaming his name as she erupted in passion was all Torin needed to join her and he let go, his own pleasure bursting with such intensity that he let out a roar.

The sensation that had rocked Flora’s body rapidly built in her again as her husband roared and she once again found herself exploding in pleasure and once again she called out his name as she did.

Torin was surprised when he heard her scream out to him again and he pounded into her to make sure she got as much pleasure from the second climax as she had gotten from the first as his seed spewed into her.

He dropped down on her for a few moments, needing to regain his strength, the intense pleasure having left him drained. Then he eased himself off her and onto his back, his breathing still labored.

Flora’s chest rose and fell dramatically, her breathing labored and her body devoid of strength, but never had she felt so satisfied, so fulfilled, so happy.

“That was glorious,” she finally managed to say.

Torin reached for her hand and locked their fingers together. "That it was, wife."

She turned her head to look at him. "We must make love often."

His face broke out in a huge smile. "Aye, I agree."

Flora turned on her side, her expression quite serious. "Did I please you?"

"Immensely," he said, his wide smile remaining.

"I am relieved to know that since I would have hated to disappoint you when you brought me such tremendous pleasure."

Torin turned on his side as well and brought their joined hands up to kiss hers. "There is more for you to learn and for us to share."

"I am eager to learn it all and share it all." A yawn caught her unaware and Torin as well.

"And we shall." He leaned close to kiss her, then released her hand, and reached down to pull the blankets over them and tuck her against him. "It has been a long, busy day with far too much happening for one day. We both need sleep and I doubt even the ghost will be able to wake us from our slumber."

"He visited already. He will not be back tonight," Flora said and yawned again.

"What do you mean the ghost has already visited?"

She glanced up at him from where her head rested on his chest. "The wind and moan came and guided me up to the tower. Though, it was my own doing since I asked the ghost how I could help him."

"You what?" he asked, staring down at her in disbelief.

"It is either the wind or a ghost causing the problem and I need to examine both possibilities. So, to see if it could be a ghost, I spoke to him and followed the moan and the wind that circled my feet and seemed to urge me on."

“And did the ghost answer you?” Torin asked, the question sounding foolish to him.

“I believe he did. When I reached the tower, I asked what he wanted from me. At first, I heard nothing, and it was not easy to see since the torch was dimly lit.”

“That torch is never kept lit,” Torin said.

“I thought perhaps you had it lit.”

“Nay, I will see it extinguished.”

“Not necessary,” Flora said. “It is no longer lit. I believe the ghost showed me what he wanted. I heard an unfamiliar sound, and it took a moment to see what it was. I finally spotted it. The corner of one stone was crumbling, its pieces falling to the floor. I asked the ghost if he wanted the room unsealed and that was when the torch blew out.”

CHAPTER 20



“Something is wrong, you are far too quiet this morning,” Torin said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze as they walked through the village.

Flora smiled. “I was thinking of last night and how you woke me this morning. It was quite lovely and extremely enjoyable, and I must say though coupling is new to me, I feel I already have learned much. But then again instinct guides if one is not fearful of following its course.”

“Now there is the endless chattering wife I have come to know and love,” Torin said, a bit surprised that he had missed her chatter as they walked.

Flora stopped, her smile fading. “I realized that love is not something you learn. It is something you experience, and unexpectedly, and no amount of trying to make sense of it does any good. It is meant to be embraced and cherished and held close for once you feel it, you never want to let it go.”

Torin captured his wife in a quick embrace. “And I never intend to let you go, wife. You belong to me, and I belong to you—forever.”

“So, you finally admit you love your wife,” Kinnell said with a broad smile.

“And have you finally admitted you love Iona?” Flora asked, turning to face Kinnell.

Torin grinned, his wife’s question asked without an ounce of judgment or teasing, only curiosity.

Kinnell grimaced. “I cannot believe how I feel about such a demanding woman.”

Flora shook her head. “Iona does not demand... she is a wise and confident woman who speaks her mind which intimidates people. It is also the very reason why people seek her skill when needed. They trust in her because of her confidence.”

Kinnell stared at her, looking as if he was about to say something then changed his mind, then decided to speak only to have Flora continue talking.

“You have the same bewildered look most men do when I give my opinion on something. My da was considered a knowledgeable man and his opinion and advice frequently sought and followed. I listened often to his conversations with other men while dutifully serving them refreshments. Naturally, I was ignored, but it did not matter to me since I was gaining knowledge. If my da was the one, here now, offering you his opinion you would have no trouble considering and trusting it. So, know that I heard my da give similar advice one day to a man who was beside himself with a woman who he favored but had strong opinions and little patience for men who dictated to her.”

Kinnell appeared even more bewildered. “You confuse me and yet you still make sense.”

Flora laughed. “My mum advised my da to simplify it for the man when my da reiterated the conversation to her. Simply put... the man was in love and love never makes sense. I would think more on a portion of what you said—*cannot believe how I feel*. I think that says it all.”

Kinnell shook his head. “Love is madness.”

“It most certainly is not, though it can cause some men to do insane things, women as well,” Iona said, joining them. “And why do you talk of love?”

Panic widened Kinnell’s eyes, not ready to admit anything to Iona, let alone himself, and Torin was quick to come to his rescue.

“I was saying how much I love my wife,” Torin said, giving Flora a hug.

“I am glad you admit what everyone else can see,” Iona said. “I would stay and talk but it is my day to visit with Philip.”

“Is he ill?” Flora asked anxiously, having grown to like the elderly man.

“Nay, I visit with him regular to see how he does, and truthfully, I enjoy visiting with him. He seems to know more of what goes on in the clan than anyone.” Iona looked to Torin. “Pay heed to the people, my lord. Worried whispers circulate over the drowned men found last night and the one who died.”

“Worry not, Iona. I am aware and I am seeing to it,” Torin said, taking no offense to her cautionary words.

“She need not caution you,” Kinnell whispered after Iona was a distance away.

“Iona speaks not only her concern but others as well since many confide in her. I would be foolish not to pay heed to her warning,” Torin said.

“A wise perception,” Flora praised.

Kinnell tilted his head as he continued to stare at Iona. “Perhaps it would be wise of me to speak with her and learn what people are saying.” He glanced quickly at Torin. “Unless you have need of me, my lord.”

“Not at the moment. We will talk later in my solar,” Torin said and with a nod Kinnell hurried off.

“We should see to our task since I am eager to return to the keep and show you the crumbling stone on the sealed door,” Flora said.

“And I am eager to see it,” Torin admitted. What happened to his wife last night while he was not there continuing to puzzle him.

Flora stood looking around the area when they reached it. “He made it a good distance in from the water before

collapsing.”

“I am surprised that he did. The water is frigid this time of the year. I do not know how he survived as long as he did. Or why he even attempted it. He had to know how cold the water would be, so why take the chance?” Torin shook his head. “Coins. It had to be a sizeable amount for the men to have taken such a deadly chance.”

He watched as his wife studied the ground around her.

“There were many men here last night?” she asked.

“Several warriors and Kinnell.”

She continued to scan the ground, then suddenly turned and walked off.

Torin was quick to follow.

“Would this have been the most likely way for him to have come from the loch?” she asked.

“Aye, it would have been.”

Flora peered along the ground as she walked.

“What do you look for?” Torin asked.

She stopped suddenly and squatted down to examine something. “The dying man spoke about the giant saving him. Could this be the giant’s footfall?” She pointed to a spot on the ground.

Torin squatted down beside her to see a sizeable partial footprint. “Someone pulled him out of the loch and dragged him to the spot.” He looked to where the man had been found.

“Perhaps someone knew him and offered what help he could?” Flora suggested.

Torin scowled, annoyed. “That could be only one person.”

“Walsh,” they said in unison.

* * *

“I SUPPOSE it would be useless of me to tell you that I will speak with Walsh alone,” Torin said as they entered the keep.

“Of course, it would,” Flora said. “I may think of questions you fail to ask or questions I ask may have you asking others questions you had not thought to ask or the same of you for me. It would be foolish of us not to speak with him together.”

As usual his wife took no offense to his suggestion, she simply pointed out the reason for it being otherwise.

“Bring a hot brew to my solar for my wife, Anwen,” Torin called out, spotting the woman in the Great Hall when they entered. “A shawl as well,” he added when he saw Flora shiver.

Torin led her to his solar where he moved a chair closer to the fire and made her sit. “You will warm yourself.”

Flora did not argue, a chill having felt as if it soaked down into her bones. She rubbed her hands together warming them while her mind got busy with questions for Walsh and was grateful for the hot brew when a servant handed her a tankard.

Torin took the shawl from Anwen when she entered the solar and draped it around his wife’s shoulders.

“All goes well with the work, Anwen?” Flora asked when the woman turned to leave.

“Aye, my lady. The furnishings you chose are being moved to your solar and Hadwin has a mortar and pestle he thinks will suit your needs. He also has a few other things he thinks might interest you.”

“We will go see him as soon as I get a chance, Anwen,” she said, eager to see what the merchant had.

Anwen went to leave and stopped, the door blocked by Walsh, Kinnell standing behind him, Torin having sent him to fetch the man.

Flora caught the way Walsh stared at Anwen for a moment, then gave her a nod and stepped aside. He always seemed to linger on Anwen when he looked upon her and she wondered over it and if Anwen noticed it herself.

Kinnell stepped aside to let Anwen take her leave, then shut the door behind her.

“You wished to see me, my lord?” Walsh asked.

Torin did not waste any time, he was blunt. “Did you pull the mercenary from the loch?”

Walsh raised his chin. “It would be foolish of me to deny it. I did pull him from the loch. His name was Tilden. He went where the best coin was offered. I knew him only in passing. We never worked a mission together.” He ran his hand roughly over his beard. “When I heard that two men had been found trying to enter the isle from the loch, I went and walked some areas I thought might easily be breached. I found Tilden and dragged him to where you found him.”

“Why not tell me?” Torin asked.

“I knew what you would think, what you think now, that I have lied to you, and I am here to carry out whatever mission these men took on.”

“Are you?” Torin demanded.

“Does it matter what I say? You will not believe me,” Walsh said defiantly.

“You should at least attempt to explain,” Flora said.

Walsh remained defiant. “I speak the truth. What else is there for me to say?”

“The whole truth would help,” Flora suggested.

“The truth is sometimes necessary but not always helpful,” Walsh said.

Flora stood, staring at Walsh. “I heard my da say that a few times to a man he would meet with privately and refused to let me meet.” Her next words surprised her as well as her husband and Kinnell. “You knew my da.”

“Your da warned me you had a quick mind. You are much like him,” Walsh said.

Torin stepped forward, his arm going around his wife. “Explain.”

“All of you,” Walsh said, looking from Torin to Flora then to Kinnell, “must swear never to speak of what I am about to tell you.”

“That will depend on what you have to say,” Torin cautioned, his arm remaining firm around his wife.

It did not deter Walsh, he spoke up, “I am not a mercenary by choice, I spy for the king.” He looked at Flora. “And so did your da.”

Flora was glad her husband had a tight arm around or she thought she would drop. “My da was a spy?”

“When needed,” Walsh said. “The king summoned me when your mum and da got sick. By the time I got there, they had both died and you had left for your uncle’s home in the Highlands. The king feared you might have information pertaining to the mission your da and mum had been on and sent me to see what I could find out.”

“My mum was a spy as well?” Flora asked, not believing what she was hearing.

“Your da shared everything with your mum, as you well know, there was no way he could have spied without her knowing about it.”

“That was why they did not take me on all their travels,” Flora said, thinking back. “They would not take the chance of putting me in danger.”

“Aye, and it is why the king now worries that their deaths may have had something to do with your da’s last mission and that you might somehow know something that could prove harmful to someone. With attempts on your life, I would say the king’s misgiving are warranted. Someone is out to silence you.”

“Why didn’t you tell us this from the beginning?” Torin asked, a bite of anger in his words.

“Until I could see for myself that you posed Flora no danger, I could not take the chance,” Walsh said and looked to Flora. “I gave my word to your da that if anything unexpected should happen to him and your mum that I would see you kept

safe. I am here more to honor my word to your parents than for the king. Your da and mum were good people.”

Tears threatened Flora’s eyes, but she held them back.

“You are satisfied now that I love my wife and mean her no harm?” Torin asked.

“After the attempts on her life and how you have protected her and how everyone talks about how they can see how much Lord Torin loves his wife, I am satisfied you mean her no harm.”

“This is good. Now we can work together to solve this mystery,” Flora said and went right on questioning him. “How have you not heard about this bounty on me? You are a mercenary, or so everyone believes, you should have heard of something.”

“I was anxious to make my way to you, fearing I might be too late and took a path less traveled so I could reach you faster. Once I got here and spotted the man in the tree, I knew you were in danger and there was no way I was going to leave you here until I knew if you were safe.”

“Would you have any idea who might be responsible for this bounty on my head?” Flora asked.

“The king made me aware of your da’s mission, and the information he was seeking could have provided us with a way of identifying a spy your da had discovered was deeply embedded in Edinburgh. But it is believed your da’s mission was compromised, the unknown spy somehow getting wind of it and seeing that the fellow your da was to meet suffer an unexpected accident. The king wishes to make sure your da did not confide anything in you and perhaps the spy feels the same.”

“Unless he simply seeks revenge against her da for causing him trouble,” Torin suggested, his worry growing for his wife’s safety.

“There is that possibility,” Walsh agreed. “What did your da discuss with you on his return home?”

“My da and mum were already ill upon their return home and went straight to their beds, never to leave them. Neither of them ever got a chance to discuss their travels with me,” Flora said, recalling how worried she had gotten seeing them both so pale and tired, and unable to eat the littlest of food.

Kinnell offered advice. “Could Walsh go and see what he could learn from other mercenaries concerning the bounty?”

“That might not go well,” Flora said and explained. “Word no doubt has reached other mercenaries that Walsh was here when the mercenaries who did strike died. They probably assume he is responsible, keeping others at bay so that he can claim the bounty for himself when he is ready.”

“She is right. None will trust me now,” Walsh said. “Besides, the true person behind a mission, the one offering the coins, is not always known to the mercenaries, keeping him safe from discovery.”

“So, what you’re saying is that we truly have no idea who placed the bounty on my wife’s head,” Torin said. “Which means it might have nothing to do at all with her da’s mission. Then the question begs, who would want my wife dead and why?”

CHAPTER 21



“I cannot believe my parents spied for the king. My da did not always agree with him on issues,” Flora said, pacing her workroom or, as everyone referred to it, her solar. “How did I not see that?”

“Your da evidently agreed with him on some issues or he would have never agreed to spy for him, and I imagine your da and mum wanted to make certain you never learned of it to keep you safe,” Torin said, troubled that his wife was upset, though understandably so.

“My dreams,” she said, thinking on them. “The dark figure must be the one who is after me, yet my parents ask for my help... why?”

Torin took hold of her arm and drew her into a light embrace. “You have taxed your thoughts enough today. Let it be for now and think on it fresh tomorrow.”

Flora sighed. “As much as I do not want to admit it, you are right. Too much time spent on it will only bring more confusion.”

“Why don’t we go have a look at that crumbling stone you told me about?” he suggested, hoping it would help ease her mind off her parents.

“A wonderful idea,” she said excitedly and kissed his cheek before she went to flee his embrace.

Torin hooked her around the waist with his arm and drew her against him before she could take a step. “That is not a proper kiss, wife.”

She smiled, seeing a wicked teasing in his dark eyes. “You are right, husband. It is not.”

He did not expect the kiss that landed on his lips. It was a punch of passion that he not only eagerly responded to, but his manhood did as well. And the more they lingered in it, the harder his shaft grew.

Flora found herself breathless when she ended it with nips along his bottom lip, just as he sometimes did to her. She took a moment to let her breathing calm, then asked, “Was that better, husband?”

“Not near enough, wife,” Torin said and winked at her. “Time for another lesson.” He spun her around, bent her over the table, and moved her garments out of the way. He ran his hand over her naked backside, then gave it a squeeze. “Spread your legs, I am eager to slip inside you.”

With the kiss having more than provoked her passion, she quickly did as he asked, though she had to ask, “It is permitted to couple outside of the bedchamber?”

“We can couple wherever we want, wife,” he said and adjusted her stance so he could easily slip into her.

She gasped. “I love the feel of you inside me.”

Bloody hell, if her words did not fire his passion even more. “I will make sure I am inside you as often as you would like.”

“In different places. We must try different places,” she hurried to say before releasing a moan of pleasure.

Torin did not know how he got so lucky in choosing Flora for a wife, but he would spend the rest of his days thanking the heavens for her.

He kept hold of her bare bottom as he set a rhythm for them and when he heard her muffled moans, he knew she fought not to cry out for fear of someone hearing her. Their unexpected passion had flamed fast, and he would see them satisfied just as fast.

Flora let out a harsh whisper, “Torin!”

“Let go,” he ordered, and she did and as she did, so did he. Both their groans filled the room until finally Torin bent down over her planting his hands on either side of her head as the last of his climax dissipated.

“I will never be able to work at this table without recalling this moment,” she said, her voice muffled against her arm.

Torin brought his mouth near her ear. “I will see that this is not the only moment you recall here.”

She pressed against him and shuddered, his words igniting a lingering spark that fired a brief and mild second climax.

“I am so enjoying the lessons,” she said on a sigh.

“So am I, wife, so am I,” Torin said and slipped gently out of her and pulled her garments down. When she did not move, he slipped his arm under her breasts and eased her up, turning her to rest against him.

“I do so love you, husband,” she said, her head resting on his chest.

“I am a lucky man to have your love, Flora, and even luckier to have fallen so deeply in love with you.”

She tilted her head back to smile up at him. “We are both lucky to have found each other.”

“But I was wise enough to wed you,” he said with a teasing glint in his eyes.

“I will agree with that one, husband, for I did not like that the only option left to me was to wed you, a stranger. I could not imagine spending the rest of my days with you here in the Highlands with everything so unfamiliar to me, and now... I cannot imagine being anywhere else but here with you.”

He kissed her quick. “And here is where we will stay together. Now let’s go see about that crumbling stone.”

* * *

TORIN EXAMINED THE STONE. “The mortar is crumbling. I can have it repaired.”

“What if it is not meant to be repaired? What if it is meant to be unsealed, finally opened to free whatever has been locked away all these years?” Flora asked. “I know it probably sounds foolish, but I got the sense that I was led here for a reason, and I believe that reason is for this room to be unsealed and the keep freed of whatever secret it harbors.”

“I heard my grandda warn my da repeatedly and my da warned me repeatedly never to unseal the room.”

“They are gone, and you are here, and something haunts this keep, and the clan has suffered with worry over the ghost. The room will either prove that the tower windows allow the air to rush in through the keep and create the moaning sound everyone fears is a ghost or, possibly, free whatever has been locked away all these years.”

“And what if it is not meant to be freed? What if there is something in there that has been meant to stay locked away forever?” Torin asked, troubled with the decision he would need to make.

“Nothing stays locked away forever. Somewhere along the way secrets are revealed just like with my da and mum. I would have never believed they kept a secret from me, and they probably never planned for me to find out, but I did. While I can understand why they never told me, I wish they had confided in me. I know I shouldn’t, and it is foolish, but I somehow feel left out of their lives because of it.” She rested her hand on his chest. “You do not keep any secrets from me, do you?”

“Nay, Flora, I have no hidden secrets and I will not keep any secrets from you through the years, for I would not want you to do that to me. We share always, whether good or bad, we speak the truth to each other.”

“Aye, always the truth,” she agreed with a nod.

“As for this room, I still need to think on it. If the tower was a place where people were tortured, what would I release

by opening it? And if not, then what else might reveal itself that was never meant to be made known? It is a serious decision to make, and I cannot make it quickly or lightly.”

She reiterated what she had once told him. “I understand and I will support whatever decision you make.”

“I am pleased you continue to understand. Now I need to have my daily talk with Kinnell and see if anything in the clan, besides the obvious, needs my attention. And you will remain in the keep, so I need not worry.”

Torin left Flora in the Great Hall talking with Anwen and went to his solar with Kinnell, his mind lingering on the tower room and his wife’s safety.

* * *

FLORA LAY AWAKE, her husband sleeping soundly beside her. They had lingered in their lovemaking once in bed and she smiled at the memory of the way he had explored her body and how she had done the same to his. In the end, they had rushed to finish their need was so great for each other. She had thought she would fall asleep as fast as her husband had, so satisfied and at ease she felt, but sleep would not come.

She listened to the crackle of the fire, her husband’s easy breathing, and closed her eyes lingering in the warmth and safety she felt with her husband lying beside her. All was good and yet she felt an unrest stirring in her. She reasoned it was because of what she had learned about her parents and the threat to her life with no apparent reason for it. She was accustomed to discussing things with her parents and together they would reach conclusions, but they were not here to help her with this, and they could very well be the cause of the problem. They would not be happy knowing they may have brought her harm. Why, though, were they asking her for help in her dreams?

She shook her head, trying to chase away her relentless thoughts so she could finally sleep. She forced herself to keep

her eyes shut, thinking sleep might have no other choice but to claim her.

She concentrated on the crackling and occasional pop of the fire when a sudden chill hit her feet beneath the blanket. It circled them as it had the other night, then began to creep slowly up her legs, sending an icy cold through her. The cold continued to make its way up her body, hugging at her waist, nipping at her breasts until it felt as if it completely encompassed her. She tried to reach out for her husband's hand, but she could not move. She tried to call out to him, but she had no voice. Fear gripped her, not knowing what to do, not knowing what was happening to her.

She caught a movement out of the corner of her eyes, a shadow hovering nearby and then it began to approach the bed. She tried desperately to call out to her husband again, to reach for his hand, to seek his protection, but she remained frozen unable to move. The shadow drew closer and just as it got near the bed the cold that engulfed her rushed off her and flew at the shadow.

Flora let out a bloodcurdling scream.

"Flora! Flora! Wake up. It is nothing more than a dream. Wake up!"

Flora's eyes sprung open, and she rushed into her husband's arms relieved to feel his strength wrap protectively around her.

"The cold and the shadow," she said with a shiver, still feeling as if the cold continued to embrace her. "The cold protected me from the shadow."

"It was nothing more than a dream," Torin said, hoping to calm her.

"Or a warning," she suggested. "Ghosts were something I gave little credence to. They were part of tales told to entertain and frighten. Since arriving in the Highlands and experiencing things that sometimes lack reason, I wonder if there is a grain of truth to those tales."

“A thought better left for the morning. Sleep now, you are safe in my arms,” he said, hugging her close and running his hand along her back to chase the chill from her body.

Flora snuggled against him but did not close her eyes. Her husband had certainly shown he could keep her safe, but could he keep her safe from her dreams?

* * *

NO SNOW HAD FALLEN in the last few days and things had been quiet around the keep and in the village. Many were hesitant to believe the ghost was gone but relieved he had not made himself known again. No more attempts had been made on Flora’s life to her relief, though that could be attributed to her husband’s intense vigilance. Whatever the reason for the quiet, Flora was grateful for it. It allowed her to think more clearly and sensibly.

She smiled and hurried to Philip’s cottage seeing him standing outside waiting for her.

“For you,” she said once inside, handing him a wool blanket and placing a cloth bundle she also carried on the table. “The winter is far too cold here to keep warm with only one blanket.” She glanced at his narrow bed, having noticed the single blanket the last time she was there.

“That is most generous of you, my lady. My old bones do not take the cold as well as they did when I was young,” Philip said and placed the folded blanket on the bed. “Please sit, my lady, I have a hot brew ready for us.”

Flora untied the knot of the cloth bundle spreading it wide to reveal its contents. “And I have cook’s delicious honey bread to go with it.”

Philip grinned with delight. “Honey bread has been my favorite since I was young.”

They both sat to enjoy the hot brew, the bread, and to delve into conversation.

“My mum told me it was the first food I ate upon our arrival here in the clan and that I never stopped eating it,” Philip said, smiling softly at the memory.

“I thought you were born here, Philip.”

“I might as well have been. I was barely two years when my mum and I landed here. My da had died from an illness that hit him quickly and took him just as quickly from what my mum told me. After that, my mum could not work the farm alone and so we had to leave. We found a home here with an older aunt who took us in and was alone herself. I wed Jenny, a lass I had known since I was young, just after my mum passed. We shared the good and bad together, losing two bairns, one shortly after he was born, and the lass succumbing to a fever that hit the clan when she was five years. Jenny and I had many years together after that, but not nearly enough when you love someone. I miss them all every day.”

Flora reached out to rest a comforting hand over his aged one, seeing tears gather in his eyes. “I know the feeling well. I think of my parents and miss them every day.”

“It is good you have Lord Torin to love you and look after you and it is good to have a fair and caring ruler once again. You both will do well by the clan.” He shook his head. “Years later, after Lord Dermid passed, I heard someone say that he hoped Lord Hamish did not change like his da had done.”

“He was not a kind man?” Flora asked.

Philip shrugged. “How does one judge a man who must lead a clan? So much responsibility.”

“You have heard nothing through the years, not even a snippet of gossip, as to why the tower room was sealed?” Flora asked.

“I wish I could help you, my lady, but with the room already sealed when my mum and I arrived here and few people willing to speak about it, or so my mum said, there is little to tell. As I got older, she warned me to keep my distance from the keep, Lord Dermid was quick to anger for little to no reason. To this day, I have never been inside the keep.”

“Oh my, that is not right. You must come visit and see for yourself the welcoming place it has become.”

Philip smiled. “I truly would like that, my lady.”

Flora smiled and laughed as conversation continued, enjoying tales of Philip’s younger years, and learning more about the clan and the keep along the way.

She left Philip smiling, having enough honey bread to last him until tomorrow though he warned it would probably not last him the day.

Closing her cloak tight around her against the cold and seeing the sky had grayed considerably, a sure promise of snow, she had one more place to stop before returning to the keep. She had planned to do this sooner but found herself making excuses to delay it. Now, she was determined to see it through.

She spotted him walking through the village and called out, “Walsh, a moment please.”

He stopped and approached her slowly. “I knew the time would come that you would want to talk. That you would have questions, but I do not know if I will have the answers you seek.”

“I do not know what answers I seek,” Flora admitted not only to him but herself.

“Then I will tell you what your da told me to tell you if the time ever came, though he hoped it wouldn’t, that his secret was revealed to you, and you had more questions than there were answers.”

“Aye, please tell what my da advised,” she said, eager to hear the message her da had left for her.

“These were his words. He made me repeat them over and over so I would get them right. He said you would understand,” Walsh said, and took a fortifying breath then continued. “Flora, as seekers of knowledge we look for explanations to everything. However, some things in life cannot be explained. They simply must be lived.”

A smile lit Flora's face, hearing her da's soft yet strong voice speaking those words and the image of his bushy brows almost touching as they drew tight in concentration made her feel as if he was there with her.

"Thank you, Walsh, for delivering my da's words and I am most grateful to you for being his friend and keeping your word to him."

"I have yet to do that. I will see you safe before I take my leave," Walsh said, his eyes drifting past her shoulders. His interest caught elsewhere.

Flora followed his glance and was not surprised to see that his attention had been drawn to Anwen smiling and talking with friends.

"Maybe it is time you followed my da's advice and simply live," Flora said and turned away, leaving him staring after her.

If her parents' death had not forced her to come to the Highlands to her uncle's clan, she doubted she would have understood her da's message. While he had spent endless time in talk and studies, it was not until he took on an adventurous side and truly began to live, began to fully experience things, did he begin to gain the knowledge he sought. The reason he had accepted the king's post as a spy. It had challenged him, and he had learned from it.

What an adventure it must have been for him and her mum, and Flora was glad they had gotten to live it.

Flora smiled when she saw her husband approach, though worried when he did not return the smile.

Torin took her hand when he reached her. "The men have returned from their mission, and they have news of the bounty on your head. I thought you would want to be there when I speak with them."

CHAPTER 22



“That is a substantial sum,” Flora said, learning the amount of the bounty. “And yet you say you could learn nothing of the person who offers this bounty.” She continued talking, not waiting for a response. “Why would anyone go after such a bounty without any proof that it would be paid? What if this anonymous person started a rumor of an offered bounty when there is none? What if it is his way of seeing it done without it costing him one coin?”

“That would be foolish, my lady,” the one warrior hurried to say.

“John is right, my lady, no person would take such a chance,” the other warrior said. “Everyone knows you do not double-cross a mercenary. You would be hunted down, and your death would not be an easy one.”

Torin hurried to ask a question before his wife could. “Were you able to learn where the bounty was first offered, Owen?”

“The furthest we could trace it was near to the lowlands from what one man shared, my lord,” Owen said.

“Who would the mercenary contact when ready to collect the bounty?” Torin asked.

“No one would say,” my lord, and I believe they did not know,” John said. “I think it was because only the individual leaders of the mercenary troops were given the information.”

“How would one confirm my death to this person, for surely a person’s word alone would not be sufficient enough to

collect the coin?" Flora asked, and both men looked to Torin.

"You do not want to know, Flora," Torin cautioned, the idea of what would be done to her sending a furious rage racing through him.

"Of course, I want to know. I want to be prepared for whatever may— OH!" Flora said when it hit her. "My head would be removed and presented to the person." Her eyes sprang wide. "That would mean I am recognizable to this person." She shook her head. "But I have been to too many places to recall all who may have met me or have seen me in passing or with my parents."

"One other important fact, my lord," Owen rushed to say when Flora paused. "The bounty was only offered to the most powerful mercenary groups, and they have made it quite clear that any rogue mercenary who attempts otherwise will suffer the consequences."

"A sign this person is quite serious and is in a hurry to see it done," Flora said and quieted as she tilted her head in thought, though not for long. "Why then has it been quiet these last few days with no attempts made?"

Torin had the answer to that. "Walsh! Word spreads fast and no doubt it has been learned that Walsh has accessed the isle and with the death of the first man in the trees when he arrived, the other man he killed supposedly to help me, and with the three recent deaths, it is probably believed that he stopped them, intending the bounty for him and his men."

"Walsh has had ample time to kill me, and yet he has not," Flora said and thought of the message he had given her from her da that had to have been from him or did she want to believe it had been?

"You cannot spend coin if you do not survive the mission," John said.

Owen agreed with a nod. "Walsh is wiser than most of the mercenaries. He would make sure to carry out the mission and make his escape."

Flora's silence alerted Torin that she was upset, and he quickly dismissed the two men. "Go get food and drink. You did well."

Torin turned to his wife, lost in her thoughts, he reached out and took her hand in his. He was glad she spoke before he could, not sure how to quell her troublesome thoughts.

"I just spoke with Walsh. He gave me a message from my da. It was meant to be given to me if I learned of his extra activities and continued to question. My da told Walsh I would understand it, and I did. I will not deny I longed to have a word with my da again and share in things he or I have learned. I want to believe he did not let death stop him from reaching out to me and sharing knowledge he had learned and wished to share with me. I also want to believe that Walsh was a friend to my da and not a foe. But I also do not want to be a fool and trust blindly in a man I do not know."

"He is being watched, for I have yet to fully trust his word," Torin said. "But you will not approach Walsh alone on that I will have your word, wife."

"I promise," she said to his relief. "I am perplexed as to what we should do next. We must discover who is behind this but how do we do that when isolated here on the isle? And it would make no sense for me to travel back home to see what someone might know there, for I doubt I would survive the journey."

"You are not going anyplace. Your home is here now, and it is where you will stay," he commanded with authority, a fear rushing through him of what could happen to her if she took such a chance.

"I am wise enough to know that would be a foolish thing to do," Flora said, then grew quiet, though not for long. "There might be another way."

Torin eyed her skeptically when she turned an overly sweet smile on him, and he did not think he was going to like what she was about to suggest.

“If we could capture one of the mercenaries and have him tell us where his leader is camped, you could send a troop to capture him, and he could tell us who he is to contact when ready to claim the bounty.”

He released her hand and stepped closer to her, their bodies almost touching.

Flora fought to retain her sweet smile when she would rather melt against her husband and have his arms wrap snugly around her. It amazed her how intimate thoughts constantly invaded her mind. She often shook her head in futile attempts to be rid of them, nonsensical as it was, but nothing seemed sensible since she discovered the pure joy of making love with her husband.

She almost shook her head again, realizing she had allowed thoughts of being in her husband’s arms to distract her from an important matter.

“First of all, wife, never will I allow you to be purposely placed in harm’s way. Secondly, mercenaries are a vicious lot not to be taken lightly in battle, and lastly, it would take torture to get a mercenary leader to reveal any information.”

“What if we bargained with him, made some sort of a deal from which he would benefit?”

“You never ever trust a mercenary. His word means nothing,” Torin advised.

“I must disagree with you on that,” Flora said. “I met a man who was once a mercenary and I trust him explicitly.”

“Who is that?”

“Lord Cree of Clan Carrick.”

Torin smiled and shook his head. “He is the exception... an honorable man and warrior who is respected and feared and for a good reason. His skill as a warrior is renowned as is his fearlessness in battle. There are not many who would not fight by his side and there are many who would not dare fight against him.”

“I still believe it is worth a try, otherwise what is left to us?” Flora argued. “How long must we continue to live in fear of what may happen to me? We must do something, or are we to live fearful forever?”

“That will not happen,” Torin commanded.

“And how will you prevent it?” she asked.

Torin grinned and kissed her. “What you suggested spawned an idea in me that might work. It will also help us discover if Walsh is friend or foe.”

Flora hugged her husband tight before saying, “See what debating matters can do... birth new thoughts, options, solutions. I am thrilled that you discuss matters with me. You truly are a good husband. Now tell me your idea.”

* * *

“YOU WISHED TO SEE ME, my lord,” Walsh said with a bob of his head, then turned to Flora. “My lady.”

“Aye,” Torin said, and before he could say another word his wife chimed in.

“We have devised a plan to discover who is behind this bounty on my head and we need your help.” Flora gave no one a chance to speak. She went right on talking. “We have learned that only the mercenary leaders were told the identity of the person they were to get in touch with when they had accomplished the mission. We believe that attempts on my life have waned because of your presence here that other mercenaries believe you are here to see the mission done and claim the bounty.”

Walsh quickly interrupted her. “I have no such information and my troop is not with me as I told you I left to find you after speaking with the king.”

“Maybe so,” Flora said. “But you would not travel alone. They wait for you, whether close or at a distance, and they know you are here, and no doubt wait for your orders.”

“And you no doubt wish to find out if I can be trusted,” Walsh said annoyed.

“Aye, it is only logical that we do. Though, I must admit I tend to trust you when I probably should be more cautious. My husband, however, is the wiser one in this situation.”

Torin could not stop from smiling. She praised him yet in a logical sort of way. Nonetheless, it pleased him.

“Where do your men wait?” Torin asked.

Walsh didn’t hesitate to respond. “A distance from here. Where they cannot be detected. I am aware you heavily patrol the woods beyond the bridge, so I took no chance in you finding them.”

“When will your men return with news of the bounty?” Flora asked.

Walsh flashed a scowl at her. “This was a ruse to get me to admit what you suspected?”

“My husband’s idea,” Flora said proudly. “And I can honestly say I would have never thought of it... because I trusted you. Torin warned me not to trust mercenaries.”

“You should trust few people, for most lie,” Walsh advised.

“I do not lie. I see no reason for it,” Flora said.

“An honest wife,” Walsh said with a glance to Torin. “You are a lucky man.”

“More than I ever thought possible,” Torin said. “So, when do you expect your men?”

“It could be three weeks or more unless they get lucky along the way and learn something.”

“Move your troop closer to the isle. They can help join my warriors in keeping anyone from gaining access,” Torin said.

“And be the front line if attacked,” Walsh said, and Torin smiled.

* * *

“DO YOU THINK IT WILL WORK?” Flora asked later that night, lying in bed with her husband naked.

“We shall see,” he said, his hand roaming lazily over her under the several blankets that kept them warm.

“Do you think it is true?” she asked.

He gave her backside a gentle squeeze. “If what is true?”

“What Walsh said about my da, that he spied for the king, and does he, himself, truly spy for the king or is that a lie as well?”

He ran his hand slowly up her back to stroke it, feeling her frustration in her tense body. “I believe he speaks the truth when it comes to that. There would be no reason to tell such a tale. That he was friends with your da would have been enough.”

Flora sighed. “This has me frustrated and perplexed and it is annoying that we are unable to do anything but wait for news from Walsh’s men.”

“You have enough to keep yourself engaged here,” he said, his hand going to skim her breast.

“I should think on this more. I have missed something,” she said.

Torin’s hand fell off her and he dropped on his back. “Aye, your husband trying to make love to you.”

Flora turned a stunned look on him and climbed on top of him to straddle him.

Torin was equally stunned by her action.

“Nay, you have stirred my passion most adequately.”

“Adequately?”

“I meant no insult,” she said, hearing the offense he had taken to it. “I only meant that I quite enjoyed your touch even

with my mind wandering.”

Why did he not remember that his wife never looked to judge him but simply expressed her thoughts and opinions openly to him? And that his intimate touches had broken through her wandering thoughts said a lot. So did her sitting astride him.

“I should not have taken it as such,” he said. “My desire for you overruled all else.”

“Truly?” she asked.

“Aye,” he said, planting his hands on her hips. “You forever linger in my thoughts.”

Her eyes went wide. “You forever linger in my thoughts as well.”

He grinned. “I am pleased to hear that. And I am pleased to have you on top of me, though it would be much more pleasurable for us both if I slipped inside you.”

“It is permitted for me to be on top of you?” she asked with an innocence that grew him harder than he already was.

“Whatever you and I choose is permitted,” Torin said. “And I like you right where you are.”

“I like where I am as well,” Flora said and raised herself enough to reach for his shaft to slip inside her. She fumbled a bit and was quick to apologize. “Forgive me, I am not adept at this.”

“My shaft quite favors yours fumbling,” he said teasingly.

“I love touching your shaft. It feels so lovely in my hand.”

Her tempting words elicited a groan that he kept silent until she accidentally brushed the tip of his manhood against her spot of pleasure, and she let out a moan. And she did not stop, she kept pleasuring herself with his shaft, her head tipped back as she continued to moan, and her passion quickly soared.

His own sounds of passion soon joined hers after she began to stroke his shaft until her grip turned tighter and her strokes faster.

Feeling too close to spilling his seed all over her hand, Torin gripped her waist tight and lifted her. “Slip him in now,” he ordered.

Flora did as he said, needing him inside her, deep inside her. She dropped her head forward, her eyes on him as she guided his shaft into her and slid down along him until his shaft disappeared completely and snugly inside her.

“Bloody hell, wife, you feel good,” Torin said, though sounded more like he cried out in endless pleasure. He went to help her, guide her in riding him for the first time but she already was easing up and down on him. He kept his hands on her hips in case she needed his help or guidance, but she was doing quite well on her own.

She dropped down over him to kiss him deeply and with a wildness he had not expected but very much welcomed.

When she rose again, she whispered, “Touch me.”

His hands went to her breasts, cupping them and teasing her hard nipples with his fingers as she eased up and down on him again.

Flora let out a moan that rivaled the ghost’s, the exquisite feeling almost too much to bear.

Torin’s hands moved to grip her waist, sensing, seeing her passion close to erupting, but then so was his own. He held her tight and took control, bringing her up and down on him with a force that had her gasping over and over until... she erupted with a scream.

He joined her unable to stop himself as he groaned through gritted teeth at the climax that rocked his body with never-ending pleasure.

She shuddered as the last of her pleasure dwindled away and she collapsed down on her husband.

Torin’s arms wrapped around her, keeping her there, not ready to let her go, not ready for her to slip off him. Her chest rose and fell against him in labored breaths as she laid contently on top of him.

“I keep thinking that making love with you cannot get more amazing and yet it does,” she said on a soft sigh.

“I feel the same,” he said, running his hand over her back and down along her backside to find it held a chill. He went to move her off him so he could pull the soft wool blankets over them.

“Not yet,” she said, stopping him. “A moment more, so I may keep it strong in my memory.”

“We will make many more memories,” he said and kissed the top of her head.

She shivered against him, and he did not wait, he held her tight as he eased them to their sides, slipping out of her as they went. Then he pulled the blankets up over them and tucked her tight against him.

She burrowed against him, not only for his heat, but for the comfort and love she felt when in his arms.

“You should put your nightdress on. It is cold tonight,” he said, even though he preferred her naked against him.

She shook her head. “Nay, I have you to keep me warm and our lovemaking has heated the bedding quite nicely.”

Torin kept his arms snug around her, intending to continue to keep her warm and soon they were both sound asleep.

“You must help us!” Flora’s mum called out. “Help us, Flora.”

“It is imperative you help us, Flora,” her dad cried out.

“I will but tell me how. Tell me how I can help you,” Flora called out frantically not able to see her parents, not knowing where they were, the fog around them too thick.

“Help us, Flora!” her mum pleaded. “Help us find you! You are in danger!”

Flora shot up in bed with a gasp, Torin’s arm going quickly around her as he sat up beside her.

“My parents are frantic to find me. They know I am in danger and they want my help to find me, so they can help me,

” she said, leaning against her husband, shivering. “And I believe they know why.”

CHAPTER 23



“*W*ith the bitter cold and bouts of snow that has plagued us these last couple of weeks, I wonder if it will delay the return of Walsh’s men,” Flora said, lingering in the Great Hall with her husband after the morning meal.

“No doubt it will cause them some delay, but it will also cause delay and problems for those who seek to harm you,” Torin said, glad the weather also benefitted them. He turned a wickedly teasing smile on her. “Besides, I favor the snow and cold since it has provided us with much time alone in our bedchamber.”

Flora grinned with delight. “Also, time alone in my solar and your solar. I must admit, I do enjoy those unexpected times and places of lovemaking.”

Torin brushed his lips over hers and whispered, “They are favorites of mine.”

She captured his lips in a brief, tempting kiss. “Perhaps we should tour the keep today to see what more needs to be done.”

“There are some nooks and crannies that may have been neglected,” he suggested, then nipped along her neck playfully.

The howling moan rushing through the Great Hall ripped them apart and had servants rushing for the doors.

Torin jumped to his feet, his voice booming with authority as he called out, “STAY WHERE YOU ARE!”

Everyone halted, not daring to move.

The moan lessened and began to fade as Torin spoke, his voice remaining strong. “No giant or ghost haunts this keep or our clan. It is the wind that rips through the keep on exceptionally windy days and today the wind is strong.”

One servant lad bravely asked, “But, my lord, we have repaired all the broken shutters. Shouldn’t the wind not race as strongly through the keep?”

Torin was not surprised that his wife spoke before he could.

“There are some areas where tapestries still need to be hung over the shuttered windows and where mortar repairs are needed in the stones. However, I can assure you there is no ghostly creature or a mythical giant in this keep that will bring you harm. You are all safe here. But if any of you feel uncomfortable working in a particular room, then tell me and I will assign you a different chore and think no less of you for it.”

Anwen stepped forward. “I have felt more comfortable here than I ever have, my lady. If a sudden cold strikes me, I look around and see that either it has come from a cold hearth or a loose shutter or if the door to the room is open it flows in from the staircase that is forever chilly. You have taught me to look for what is a reasonable explanation rather than one that stirs unnecessary fear.”

Flora smiled. “I am so happy to hear that, Anwen.”

“I am more comfortable here as well,” another servant said.

“I have been comfortable here also but that moan—” The servant lad who had spoken up shook his head.

“It is frightening to hear, and instinct has you running. Your reaction is only logical,” Flora said. “But now you know there is no ghost, no giant that haunts this place. There is a reasonable explanation for it and once all repairs are made, we will hear it no more.”

Heads bobbed and all drifted off to return to their chores.

Flora summoned Anwen with a wave. “It delights me to know you use reason rather than fear to guide you.”

Anwen smiled softly. “It was your knowledge and guidance that taught me, my lady.”

Torin was proud of his wife. She had not only brought the keep back to life, but she had also brought life back to the clan with her talkative and inquisitive nature.

Flora graciously accepted the compliment. “That is generous of you to say, Anwen. And now for today’s chores. I went over things with Verena in the kitchen and there are two storage rooms that badly need attention, and the kitchen is long overdue for a thorough cleaning. The upper floors can wait for another day.”

“Aye, my lady,” Anwen said and hurried off, summoning the servants with a wave of her hand as she went.

“You are being generous having the servants avoid the upper floors since they remain somewhat fearful,” Torin said.

Flora leaned in closer to her husband to whisper, “I have a more selfish reason. I want the upper floors left for us alone today.”

He chuckled. “Don’t want to have to stifle your screams of pleasure?”

Her eyes rounded. “Do I scream that loud? Do you think they hear me? I must be more aware of that, though it is all your fault.”

His chuckle turned louder. “Aye, I accept it is my fault for I am proud I bring my wife so much pleasure.”

Flora sighed and rested her brow against her husband’s. “Endless pleasure.”

“You do the same for me, wife.”

She eased her head back to look at him, his dark, intense eyes capturing her heart as they always did. “I do not disappoint you?”

“Never and it would be my fault if you did since I teach you. Though I must admit, you need no lessons from me. Instinct and curiosity have you taking the lead and learning much yourself.”

“You do not mind that I do that?”

“Nay, wife,” he said with a broad smile. “I do not mind that at all. Now I think we should go tour the keep and maybe find one of those nooks or crannies I wanted to show you.”

Flora hurried to her feet, taking quick hold of her husband’s hand. “Let us waste no time.”

He followed along with her, looking forward to the pleasure that would soon be theirs.

They found their way just outside a small room that Flora had yet to have the servants clean. It contained several chests, benches, scarred wooden shields, baskets, and more.

“What was this room used for?” Flora asked, remaining on the outskirts of the room since it was bathed in darkness.

“I truly don’t know,” Torin said. “With this floor just below the tower room and ordered since I was young to keep my distance, I never came here. Sad to say, I even avoided it after my da died, having no reason to come up here.”

“You never came here, not once?”

“You do not order a young lad to stay away from a particular area in his home, for that is like giving him permission to go find out why he is not permitted there.”

“So, you snuck up here,” Flora said with a whisper as if taking no chance his secret would be revealed.

Torin grinned. “Guilty.”

“And what did you find?”

He shook his head. “Nothing but disappointment.” He rested his hand at her waist. “Though, I do recall this little nook I hid in when I thought I heard someone on the stairs.”

“Show me,” she encouraged, not that he needed it. He was quick to take her there.

There was just enough light from a torch in a wall bracket to cast a bit of light on the nook.

“This is small,” Flora said, peering into the confined space. “Whatever was its purpose?”

“I do not know or care since whatever it was, we are going to make better use of it,” Torin said, his arm hooking at her waist to step them within the small space and plant his lips on hers before she could utter a word.

Flora’s arms went around his neck, any thoughts on what the use of the nook may have been fading rapidly, replaced with a jolt of passion her husband’s kisses always aroused in her.

“I can never seem to get enough of you,” Torin said, resting his brow to hers after ending the kiss, which left him aching for more.

“Nor I of you,” she said. “Am I too greedy of a wife for desiring you so much?”

He brushed his lips over hers. “I like that you’re greedy, wife, and I like that we can be greedy together.”

They kissed again and it turned them more needy, more impatient.

Flora pulled her mouth off his to say, “It is far too small here for us— OH!” She found herself hoisted up and braced against the stone wall.

She wasted no time in reaching down to spread his plaid far enough apart to free his manhood that had poked eagerly at her when hoisted up. She then hurried her own garments out of the way, her passion growing rapidly.

Torin took command after that, lifting her up a bit higher to be able to slide easily into her. “Keep hold of me.”

She hooked her arms firmly around his neck, her body ready, anticipating the pleasure that was about to come and her husband did not disappoint. His hands were suddenly on her bare bottom, gripping it firmly as he kept her braced against

the wall and drove in and out of her with an intensity that sent endless pleasure shooting through her.

Though a moan ached to slip from her lips, she kept them locked tight. She would not take a chance of the servants hearing her cry out.

Torin lowered his head to whisper, “No one will hear you here. We are too far up, too far removed from everything and everyone and no one ever dares come up here.”

Flora let a small moan escape but as their joining became more intense, she could not hold back, her passion-filled cry seemed to echo in the small space.

Torin could not restrain his own desire, it so overwhelmed him, and he let out a mighty groan. He never intended to linger. It was not what his wife wanted or needed and either did he. A quick yet satisfying joining was what he intended.

“Now, Torin, now!” Flora cried out with a needy ache.

Torin joined her, exploding together in a powerful climax that had them both holding each other tight and as they did, they heard a sound, an unmistakable one.

“Footfalls,” Flora said, her climax interrupted.

Torin shook his head, silently cursing the interruption and groaning out one word. “Impossible.”

Unfortunately, he could not take the chance being caught in such a delicate position that could prove dangerous. He reluctantly slipped out of his wife and silently cursed again seeing disappointment on her face.

The sound came again.

“Footfalls above us,” Flora cautioned.

And once again, Torin said, “Impossible. We would have heard someone coming up the stairs. They would have had to pass by us.”

“We were occupied,” she reminded him.

“Not enough to fail to hear footfalls.” He turned, keeping his wife behind him, and peered out. Seeing no one, as he had

suspected, he turned back to his wife. "You stay here."

"It makes no sense for me to wait here," she said and took hold of his hand. "Someone could be waiting to grab me while you are distracted."

He wanted to shake his head at her, but she made sense. And though he doubted that was the case, he would not take the chance.

"You stay behind me," he ordered.

"Aye," she said and followed behind him, keeping hold of his hand.

Torin stopped a moment to pull a dagger from his boot, then headed up the curving stairs.

The light from the torch reached them as they rounded the curve.

"Did you have the torch lit?" Flora asked in a whisper.

"Nay," he said and since she asked him, he knew she gave no such orders as well.

Torin cautiously approached the last few steps that would leave them open to whoever was there and poked his head slowly around before he would allow his wife to go any farther.

There was no one there.

"But we both heard the footfalls," Flora said once they stood there staring at the empty space.

"That we did," Torin agreed, looking around puzzled.

Flora looked as well, feeling as if she may have missed something and something did catch her eye. She went to the sealed door. "Torin, come look."

Torin stood beside his wife and stared at where she pointed. The stone that had crumbled some when last he was here had now nearly crumbled through.

Flora, curious as she was, poked at the section and the corner of the stone completely broke, falling into the sealed

room, her finger disappearing through the hole.

Torin was quick to grab her wrist and yank her hand away, fearful of what her finger might meet there. As he did, a rush of cold air spewed from the hole, chilling them both.

“It would seem the room is where the rush of cold air is finding its entrance,” Flora said and brought her face close to the hole to peer through it.

Torin pulled her back. “Nay! Do not look in there. We know not what it holds.”

“Well, we certainly cannot repair the mortar now knowing the rush of wind is coming from the room. Whatever is causing it must be repaired. The years of neglect can be ignored no longer, or it may very well grow worse leaving the keep vulnerable to cold, decay, and tales of a ghost.”

Torin stared at the sealed door. “I know you are right, but endless years of being ordered never to open it leaves me troubled to do so.”

Flora placed a gentle hand on her husband’s arm. “Then take time to think on it, though not too much time, and do what you feel you must. Though, I am curious as to the footfalls we heard.”

“I cannot deny we heard them. It was clear that we did, but I cannot explain it myself.”

“Perhaps the sound echoed from someplace else,” Flora suggested.

“I suppose, though it does not seem likely since you ordered the servants to stay below.”

“We were lost in a fit of passion, perhaps we heard the decaying stone crumbling onto the floor, and we mistakenly thought it footfalls,” she said.

“Another possibility,” he conceded, though sounded doubtful.

Another frigid wind came spewing through the hole and Flora shivered.

“We are finished here,” Torin said. “And you need a hot brew to warm you.”

“There is another possibility we haven’t considered,” Flora said as her husband placed his hand at her back to guide her to the stairs.

“What is that?” he asked.

“That a ghost does exist and wants the room and its secrets revealed.”

* * *

TORIN LAY in bed unable to sleep, his wife snuggled against him. She had easily drifted off to sleep after they had made love. It had not been rushed like earlier in the day. They had taken their time, talking, touching, teasing, kissing until neither of them could wait any longer.

Now, however, he could not get his mind off the footfalls they had heard. His wife had offered feasible explanations and thought-provoking ones as well. Yet none seemed to appease him. He recalled his grandda’s words when he had asked once again about the tower room.

“Some things are better left alone.”

He had tried to imagine what could have happened that caused the room to be sealed. He had heard tales of men who had sealed enemies even a wife in a room to make them suffer and be rid of them. And then there was talk of the room being a place of torture. What demon’s ghosts would he release if horrible things had been done to people there?

It was not an easy decision for him to make and it troubled him greatly.

He shut his eyes hoping sleep would rescue him and felt himself drifting off, that was until the cold rushed over him, chilling his body to the bone.

His eyes sprang open, and he bolted up in bed and saw a ghostly figure shimmering at the bottom of the bed. The

apparition was too distorted for him to make out a clear figure. He stared, not sure what to do.

His wife was suddenly sitting up beside him.

“What is it, Torin? What’s wrong?” she asked, hooking her arm around his, a bit disoriented from her husband’s arm’s releasing her so suddenly that it had jolted her awake.

“Do you see it?” he asked, continuing to stare.

“See what?” she asked, looking where he did.

“The image floating at the bottom of the bed.”

Flora stared for a moment expecting to see something and when she didn’t, she patted her husband’s arm. “Wake up, Torin, you are dreaming.”

Dreaming? Aye, he was dreaming. It wasn’t real.

“Wake up,” she urged again.

He turned his eyes on his wife. “I am dreaming.”

“Aye, you are. Wake up,” she urged again.

He turned his glance once again to the bottom of the bed... the apparition was gone.

CHAPTER 24



“Something weighs heavily on you,” Kinnell said the next morning as he walked through the village with Torin.

“Do you ever think of that time when we saw my grandda in the woods and returned to the keep only to find out that he had died hours before then?”

“I do think on it, for I continue to wonder how we saw what we saw. Your grandda was dead. How could he appear to us? And yet we both saw him clear as day and saw him just as clearly vanish before our eyes.”

“Seeing him as we did makes me wonder if ghosts are real,” Torin said.

“Did you see a ghost in the keep?” Kinnell asked nervously.

“Nay, it was nothing more than a dream, probably caused by a problem in the tower room.”

“What problem?” Kinnell asked when Torin didn’t explain.

“A stone in the sealed door has crumbled and left a hole. Cold wind spews through it and to repair the problem the room would need to be opened.”

“Nay! Nay!” Kinnell argued. “Your da and your grandda warned you never to open that room. It was sealed for a reason. It must remain sealed.”

“If I do that then the ghost situation may never be resolved since the wind that causes the moan could be coming from the

room. Besides, there is no telling the decay that has taken place there. Do I cause more problems to the keep if I repair the seal and not the damage that may have been done all these years from neglect?”

“That is a conundrum,” Kinnell agreed. “What does your wife think? I only ask because she has endless opinions, and I am sure she offered you one.”

“Flora told me it was my decision to make, and she would support whatever I decided to do. But I believe she would like to see the room opened and I must admit part of me feels the same. I have been curious about it since I was young, and I would like to learn the truth.”

“But do you defy the orders of those who came before you?” Kinnell asked.

“Exactly,” Torin said and spied his wife walking with an elderly woman in the village.

“The clan loves her. She chats with everyone, asks them endless questions, offers her opinion whether asked or not and gives generously of whatever is asked of her. Many people claim there is no better lady of the keep than Lady Flora.”

“I chose wisely,” Torin said with a smug grin.

Kinnell laughed. “Shall I remind you why you chose her?”

Torin kept his eyes on his wife. “Nay, I am just glad I did.”

* * *

FLORA CAUGHT sight of her husband and smiled and waved at him then returned to speaking with Enid. She spoke with everyone, but she was particularly interested in talking with the elderly men and women in the clan. She hoped to find out whatever she could about the tower room to make her husband’s decision less troublesome for him.

She had been concerned last night, having been woken so abruptly when his arms rushed off her to find him sitting up in bed staring at what she thought was the door. She had assumed

he was dreaming when he asked if she saw the apparition but thinking on it this morning she wondered if she had been wrong. It had been the reason she decided to speak with the elders in the clan besides Philip. Though they were not as old as he was, they might still know something that could help her.

“So, you were born during Lord Hamish’s reign?” Flora asked.

Enid smiled and nodded. “I was and grateful for it as I am now that Lord Torin reigns. He is much like his grandfather, a good, honorable man. Not that I speak ill of Lord Evander or Lord Dermid.” She was quick to add.

“Speak the truth, Enid, they both were not good men.”

Enid shook her head. “It is not good to speak ill of the dead, Marna.”

“Lord Evander cared for only himself and the power he could gain, and Lady Amelia was useless, keeping to herself and caring about no one, not even her son,” Marna said in disgust.

“Was anything told to you about Lord Dermid and his wife?” Flora asked, hoping she might get a hint at why the door had been sealed.

“Lady Roanna,” Marna said, giving a name to the woman. “I do recall my *seanmhair* saying something about her having been a sickly woman nearly dying when she gave birth to Lord Hamish. I imagine that is why she never had another bairn.”

“Was anything said about the tower room?” Flora asked, deciding to be more direct.

“My *seanmhair* worked in the keep and refused to speak about the tower room,” Enid said. “Whatever she may have known about it, she took to her grave.”

“Probably out of fear,” Marna said, “many whispering about the torture that took place there.”

“Did either of your grandmothers or mums say who was tortured there?” Flora asked, realizing torture had been

repeatedly mentioned but no one had ever mentioned the people who may have been tortured.

Both women turned a puzzled look on each other.

“Not that I recall,” Enid said.

Marna thought a bit longer before she responded. “I cannot recall either, but then our grandmothers might have been too fearful to say.”

“True,” Enid agreed.

“How old was Hamish when the room was sealed?” Flora asked.

“Ten and two years maybe,” Marna said, sounding not sure.

What was it her husband had said to Flora about telling a lad not to do something? That it was an invitation for him to do the very thing forbidden to him. Hamish must have known what was going on in that tower room and perhaps out of fear kept the secret it contained not only then but for years to come.

Flora changed the conversation, taking the opportunity to learn more about the Highlands.

The women eagerly answered her endless questions and once done parted with smiles and hopes of talking again soon with them, which both women expressed how very much they would enjoy that.

Flora saw that her husband had lingered in the area, and she was sure he waited around to see that she was safe. She hurried toward him.

“Did you learn much from Enid and Marna?” he asked as she nudged herself in the crook of his arm and he eagerly hugged her against him.

“I did. I am amazed at the love everyone has for the Highlands, though they agree it is not an easy place to live. That it can be harsh and demanding, yet they would live no other place. I cannot wait for the winter to pass. I am eager for the women to teach me about the healing plants that grow in the woods—”

“A place you will not go without me,” Torin ordered.

Flora went right on talking, ignoring his command. “They will also teach me how to dye and spin the wool and how to create a tapestry. I am skilled at stitching, my mum insisting I learn some wifely skills.” She smiled. “I like the wifely skills you teach me the best.”

“So do I,” Torin said and stole a quick kiss before starting them toward the keep.

“Lord Torin!” Kinnell shouted, causing Torin and Flora to turn around.

“Walsh’s men have captured two mercenaries. They bring them here now,” Kinnell said, once reaching him.

Torin signaled to one of his warriors nearby and he hurried over. “Take Lady Flora to the keep and stay with her until I say otherwise.”

“Nay!” Flora protested. “I am going with you. I want to hear what these men have to say.”

“Neither will be forthcoming with answers and you, wife, will not like what must be done to get those answers.”

“It matters not, I go with you,” she insisted, folding her arms across her chest to show she would not budge on this. Though, worry of what the men may suffer turning her stomach.

Torin glared at her, annoyed at her stubbornness. “You have seen the beauty of the Highlands, perhaps it is time for you to see its dark side.”

Flora followed behind her husband since he was busy speaking with Kinnell walking alongside him. She had to hurry her steps to keep pace with the two men, their strides far more powerful than usual. Once again, she was reminded of the strength it took to live here in a land that demanded much to survive.

Walsh’s men were just finished securing the captured mercenaries to stakes that had been pounded into the ground. Flora had passed by them often and wondered over their use

and now she knew. The men's arms had been drawn behind their backs and tied at the wrists while more rope secured their ankles to the stake and still more rope was wound around their waist.

Flora realized at first glance that they were seasoned mercenaries, scars marring their faces, and showing not a bit of fear. They glared brazenly at Torin, who stared at them with a coldness that made Flora look twice at him since for a moment he appeared unrecognizable to her. She realized that she was seeing the warrior in her husband. The man who faced possible death every time he entered battle. The man who had to push fear aside to survive.

That was the man these two men needed to see. A man who would do anything to get what he wanted.

"You two know how this goes," Torin said. "You tell me, or you suffer until you finally break and tell me anyway."

"And then you kill us," the man with a front tooth missing said.

Flora stepped forward. "You would rather face death than tell my husband what he asks? Why?"

All eyes turned to her, including her husband's, whose dark scowl so intimidated that it caused her legs to tremble. But her curious nature was what it was, and she went right on talking.

"What sense would your death make? The man who sent you here does not care what happens to you. He will send another and another after that one, leaving all to die, while expecting one to eventually succeed. Your lives mean little to him and if that is so, what makes you think he will share the generous bounty with you? So why surrender your life for someone who no doubt will end it anyway?"

Both men stared at her a bit bewildered.

"He wouldn't do that," the man with sparse red hair said.

"You know that for sure?" Flora asked. "You truly trust him? Can you honestly say he has shared all bounty with you equally? Did you know only the top mercenaries were

approached for this task? What reason would the man do that? Perhaps he knows that the leaders of the most successful mercenaries will do anything to complete the task and collect the bounty, even kill the one who completed the task so he could not boast about it.”

“You talk too much. You try to confuse us. He told us to kill you before you could utter a word, then cut your head off or you would talk endlessly even while we cut off your head,” the toothless man said with a chuckle.

Torin sped past his wife and delivered a powerful blow with his fist to the man’s jaw that had blood spewing from his mouth as his head flew to the side.

“Talk about cutting my wife’s head off again and the next time you’ll get a knife to your gut that will leave you to die slowly while the birds pick at your innards.”

The other man paled as he stared at the toothless man who was busy spitting blood that would not stop spilling from his mouth.

“Thank you for that bit of information,” Flora said. “I am sure your leader will be happy to know you shared it with us.”

“What information?” the red-haired man asked, bewildered. “Gordy didn’t give you any information.

“Thank you for his name. It will make it easier to identify him when word is sent to his leader that he has spoken with us,” Flora said.

“Keep your mouth shut, Lester,” Gordy ordered and spit out another mouthful of blood. “She’s trying to trick us. I told her nothing.”

“You just told me your friend’s name,” Flora said with a smile.

“Damn!” Gordy mumbled and sneered at those laughing around him.

“You also told me that your leader warned you about talking with me which tells me that the man who placed the bounty on my head is familiar with me, most likely a friend of

my family since I chattered endlessly at home but never when I was out with my parents. I am sure your leader will be thrilled to learn that you passed information on to us that will help us locate the man.”

“Bloody hell, Gordy, if Lord Torin doesn’t kill us, Mordred will.” Lester’s eyes widened when he realized that he had revealed their leader’s name.

“Either way we are done for,” Gordy said, hanging his head, blood dribbling down on his shirt.

Flora turned to her husband. “That was much easier than I expected.”

Kinnell turned his head away laughing, and more laughter came from the warriors and Walsh’s mercenaries and Walsh himself.

“I believe your wife would stop a battle with words alone,” Walsh said, trying to contain his laughter.

“We were warned,” Lester said. “Do not let her talk. Mordred cautioned all of us repeatedly. He warned that her words are like weapons, and she hits her mark every time.”

Torin noticed his wife’s brow scrunch, but she said nothing. Something about Lester’s words had disturbed her. He would wait until they were alone to ask her, not sure it was something she wished to share with others.

“What are you going to do with us?” Lester asked.

“You are going to lead us to Mordred, and he is going to give us even more information,” Torin said.

Gordy raised his head. “He will never talk.”

“Like you two didn’t talk?” Torin challenged.

They both shook their heads.

“They’re right,” Walsh said. “Mordred’s reputation will be ruined if he talks. No one will trust him, not that he can be trusted to begin with but news like this will finish him.”

“Simply talking with him may get us the information we need without him realizing it,” Flora said.

“She talks to Mordred, and he is doomed,” Lester said, shaking his head.

“Thank you again for letting me know he is vulnerable to questions,” Flora said, her smile turning wide.

“You never could keep your mouth shut, Lester,” Gordy said. “Always going on and on, boasting how you know things no one else does.”

“What do you know that no one knows, Lester?” Torin asked, stepping toward the man.

“Look who’s talking too much now,” Lester shouted at Gordy.

“I can tell you what he knows,” Flora said, and all eyes turned on her once again.

“You know nothing. Nothing at all,” Lester said in a panic.

“Your frantic worry just confirmed my suspicion,” Flora said.

“Now she gets more information,” Gordy said with disgust.

“This information benefits you, Gordy,” Flora said, and the man looked with surprise at her. “Lester here was told that he would get your share of the bounty if he killed you once the job was done and he had my head.”

“You bastard,” Gordy said.

“That’s not fair, Gordy,” Flora scolded, “since you were offered the same deal.”

“Damn, Gordy!” Lester said.

“That’s not all,” Flora said. “Your leader probably offered the same deal to others in your crew. He no doubt never intended to share such a sizeable bounty with any of you. That amount of coin would allow him to go anywhere in the world, never to be found.”

“Bloody hell!” the two men shouted.

“That sounds like something Mordred would do.” Walsh grinned and rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. “So, which one of you takes us to Mordred and which one dies?”

CHAPTER 25



“I can almost see the thoughts spinning in your head, wife,” Torin said.

“I do not want you to go and yet I know you must,” Flora admitted, worried seeing her husband prepare for a possible battle, his sword strapped to his back, daggers tucked at his waist and in his boots. “I would say let Kinnell lead the warriors alongside Walsh and his crew, but you probably do not fully trust Walsh and worry that he may side with Mordred and overpower your troop. While I do not believe that, I understand you do what is best for your warriors and clan.”

“I am relieved to have such a wise wife,” he said.

“Knowledgeable, reasonable,” she corrected, shaking her head. “Neither of which helps me to fear less for your safety.”

He hooked her waist with his arm and drew her to him, something he did often, enjoying the feel of her resting against him and the sweet, alluring scent that always drifted off her.

“Worry not, wife. Mordred is skilled in battle and knows when to take up arms and when it is foolish to do so.”

“But what if he does not give you the information you seek?”

Torin kissed her gently. “He will, have no doubt about that.”

Flora did not want to think about what might be done to the man to get the information.

“I meant to ask you,” Torin said, stepping away from her, ready to mount his horse. “You seemed perplexed when Lester remarked that your words were like weapons, and they always hit their mark.”

Flora scrunched her brow again upon hearing it. “Those words are familiar to me. I have heard them before, but I cannot recall where.” She shook her head. “It is another bit of information that tells me that this person is known to me, though how I cannot fathom. My da had a small group of close friends yet a plethora of acquaintances, and then there were fellow scholars. It could be anyone and yet it makes no sense. Why? Why does someone find it necessary to harm me?”

“With Mordred’s capture, we will be a step closer to finding out,” Torin assured her and kissed her again before mounting his horse.

“Make sure you return to me, husband, for the Highlands can never be my home without you,” she cautioned, her heart already aching, and he had yet to leave her side.

“I will return, hopefully this evening or sooner, while you, wife, will remain in the keep or at least close to it and remain ever vigilant,” he ordered, knowing to curtail her to the keep was a useless endeavor.

“Worry not, I will remain watchful,” she assured him and found tears gathering in her eyes as she watched him ride off to lead his men into possible battle.

“Skilled warriors or not, women worry when their men go off to battle.”

Flora turned to see Iona a bit teary-eyed herself, though she was quick to stop any tears from falling with a quick brush of her hand.

“You worry over Kinnell,” Flora said, reaching out to hook arms with the woman.

“Every time he leaves here my heart aches and I worry endlessly. My relief is great when he finally returns home safely.”

“Have you two talked?” Flora asked.

“We talk but say little. I do not know if we both fear saying something and being wrong how one may feel, or we are simply cowards when it comes to love.”

“If love found a way to bring me to the Highlands to Torin, then love will find a way to bring you and Kinnell together,” Flora said with confidence.

“I pray so, my lady. I pray so,” Iona said, glancing in the distance to watch the large troop leave the village.

* * *

TORIN SAT with Walsh astride their horses waiting for Kinnell to return from scouting Mordred’s camp.

“You had Lester and Gordy fighting over who would bring us here, allowing them to think the one who did would survive while the other would meet his fate,” Torin said, looking at the two men in the distance quietly arguing with each other.

“They deserve it. They are idiots. Why do you think Mordred sent the pair? He knew they would never succeed but at least there would be two less men with which to share the bounty. He also could have used them as a distraction while planning something that could prove successful,” Walsh said.

“But we have seen no signs to make us think that. It is more the opposite. The forest is far quieter than I expected, and what of that small, abandoned campsite we passed by? The warm ashes indicate it was recently deserted, but no signs showed its occupants moved closer to the isle. It is almost as if they fled.”

“Mordred could have frightened them off. He is an intimidating man,” Walsh suggested.

Kinnell’s sudden appearance turned both men silent.

“The campsite is empty. No one in sight,” Kinnell said, perplexed. “I followed the trail, and it appears as if Mordred is in retreat, an anxious one.”

“Retreat?” Walsh questioned. “Why would he suddenly retreat?”

“There is only one reason,” Torin said.

Walsh’s eyes went wide. “No bounty!”

* * *

TORIN FOUND his wife sitting in front of the hearth in her solar upon his return. When she turned to see who had entered the room and saw it was him, she raced to him, throwing her arms around him.

She held him tight almost as if by doing so he could never escape her. “I do not know how I will cope when it is necessary for you to ride into battle. I worried endlessly over your safe return, fearful I would never see you again. I cannot bear to live without you. The very thought turns my stomach and hurts my heart. I have tried to understand it, reason it, but I have come to accept the obvious that love is not meant to be understood... it is meant to be felt. And I feel it deeply, down to my very soul—”

Torin kissed her, taking hold of her chin to turn her face up for his lips to reach hers and silence her. Otherwise, he worried she would never cease talking. Besides, he had thought about kissing her the whole ride home.

He needed to feel her lips on his, her body resting against him, her arms around him, and know that she was safe and that she was his and always would be.

Flora remained silent for only a brief time after the kiss ended. “You must be tired and hungry. I have food and drink waiting for you in our bedchamber. You will eat, rest, and tell me all that happened.” She continued talking as she led him out of the room and to their bedchamber. “I am curious to what may have happened. You do not look as if you battled, a relief for sure. But what prevented the battle? I do not believe Mordred was a man, from what Lester and Gordy said, who would surrender. So, what prevented the battle?” She stopped abruptly upon entering the room and turned wide eyes on him.

“He was not there. You did not find him, but you found something.”

He had promised to never lie to her, and he could see now how that was a wise decision, for he doubted there was a secret he could keep from her.

“Retreat,” he said, going to the table and filling a tankard to the top with ale, parched from the ride home. He downed a good portion, and his wife filled the silence with her chatter.

“That is odd. Why would Mordred retreat when he was so keen on the bounty?” Her brow shot up. “Something happened with the bounty. It was found to be false. The person proved not to have sufficient funds. The person who offered it met a mysterious end.”

“Or it could be as simple as Mordred being alerted to another mission that proved less difficult,” Torin suggested.

“I do not believe that a good theory,” she said, “since I have come to understand that coins mean much to a mercenary. He could have sent men to see to another task while still carrying out the one here, securing him even more coins.” She shook her head. “The only thing that makes sense of his departure is that it did not benefit him to remain here. I assume you sent men to see what they could find out.”

It continued to amaze him at how fast his wife’s mind worked, providing him with good counsel.

“Aye,” Torin said. “Two of my warriors and two of Walsh’s went to see what they could find out. Until we know for sure what goes on, we continue to take precautions.”

“Of course,” Flora agreed. “Though, I cannot help but wonder over it. What happened for the bounty to be rescinded? Unless they only make it appear that way.”

“I thought the same, so we spread out and searched the area, which is what delayed my return. Another campsite was found deserted, though it had been a day or more since it had been abandoned.”

“Why would that group leave before Mordred did?” she asked, turning away from her husband as if asking herself the

question and expecting an answer, which she continued to contemplate. “They could have received word from what they believed a reliable source whereas Mordred’s source took longer to confirm, since I doubt anyone would not confirm such news. Most would think it is a way to get rid of those vying for the bounty. Unless—” She shook her head as she looked directly at her husband. “The campsite belonged to someone simply passing through.”

“You know what I think, wife?” Torin said, placing his tankard on the table.

“What?” she asked, eager to hear his opinion.

“That it has been far too long since I kissed you.” He was about to walk over to her and stopped when she began to strip off her garments. Shocked, he stood staring at her.

“And I think, husband, it has been too long since we made love,” she said as she eagerly shed her garments.

His wife forever surprised him with her enthusiasm for intimacy.

“Why do you wait?” she scolded, placing a hand on her naked hip. “Do you not want to make love?” She looked puzzled. “But you never deny me. Have I been too demanding? It is up to you to tell me, for I do not know if a wife should trouble her husband too often with her needs and —”

Torin rushed to silence her with a kiss, his hands going to her bare backside to press her against him, then silently cursed himself for not stripping off his garments first.

“There is not a time I would deny you, Flora,” he said after reluctantly ending the kiss so he could hurry and shed his garments.

Flora helped him along, wanting him naked, wanting their bodies to join, wanting to feel the potency of his manhood inside her.

His wife’s anxious hands fired his already heated passion and when her hand eagerly settled on his shaft, he was not sure how long they would be able to linger.

“I do so love the feel of him whether in my hand or inside of me,” she said, stroking his shaft and feeling him enlarge in her hand.

Torin caught the moan that rose in his throat, swallowing it back down, hoping to contain his passion and not rush to climax, though he feared that might be difficult for them both.

He brought his lips to hers for a kiss while his hands roamed over her backside, giving it a firm squeeze as she continued to stroke him and rub his shaft against her. She fired his passion with every stroke, his moans building in his chest, aching to break free, until...

Torin let out a groan, then brushed her hand away, and scooped her up in his arms. “My turn, wife.”

He dropped her on the bed, grabbed hold of her legs to lift them to rest over his shoulders, then took hold of her backside to lift it higher off the bed to allow him to enter her easily and slowly.

“Now I can see how well we fit,” he said with a wicked smile and began to glide in and out of her.

“You tease,” she said on a pleasing sigh.

“Aye, that I do,” he agreed and continued to do so, bringing her a lingering passion-filled torment.

Flora gripped the blanket beneath her as his large, potent shaft filled her with pleasure as it always did. She closed her eyes with every slow thrust letting herself go, letting herself enjoy, letting herself be loved.

As her moans grew so did his thrusts and she gripped the bedding tighter and tighter. She didn't realize she was calling out his name, it slipped instinctively from her lips. Her passion took her soaring higher and higher and she yearned for the shattering fall it would bring.

She screamed for her husband when it hit and began to spiral in never-ending pleasure and when she thought she would crash, her husband pounded against her as he climaxed, and she soared again for them to come crashing down together in a breathless finale.

She could not recall when her husband came to rest over her, and she would hug him if their lovemaking had not left her body so limp and satiated or her so breathless. She smiled, feeling her husband labor for breath and his body spent against her knowing he felt the same as she did.

With effort, Torin rolled off his wife fearful his weight was too much for her, and dropped on his back, their lovemaking having stolen his strength though leaving him more than sated.

How his wife found breath to talk, he did not know, though he should know better than to think anything could stop her from talking.

“I have no words for how amazing that was,” she said.

Torin smiled for he knew she would find the words.

“It was unbelievably gratifying and while lovemaking with you is always gratifying, the pleasure seems to grow each time, making me look forward, often hunger for our next encounter.” She stopped, needing to take a breath. “I cannot express enough how happy I am that we wed and that you turned out to be the perfect husband for me. My da told me to question what fate sometimes deals us but see in the end if fate proves wiser. Fate certainly proved wiser bringing us together.”

Torin turned on his side, smiling, his wife’s endless chatter having given him time to catch his breath. “Aye, wife, I agree. We are perfect for each other.”

Flora turned on her side as well, a soft smile on her face. “I never thought to feel so strongly for someone as I feel for you. It frightens me sometimes, for I cannot bear to think of life without you.”

“Nor I without you,” Torin admitted. “But one thing I am certain, wife, you have the courage to survive and to see to the care of our children, and you have a clan—a family—that loves you and will always protect you.”

“I suppose, but I would much rather die before you than suffer such pain—” She scrunched her brow. “But I would miss you wherever it is I go and be impatient to be reunited

again. There is only one solution, we must die within a brief time of each other, so we are not kept long apart. And I would rather it be in old age, so we have many, many years together.”

“That sounds perfect to me,” he said and kissed her cheek. He grew concerned when she remained quiet, her eyes not on him. “What is it, Flora?”

“I was thinking about my mum and da. I prayed when my da died that my mum would live, fearful of losing them both. But she died shortly after him and I see now that that would be the way they would have wanted it. They would not have done well without the other, and my da often reminded me how capable and wise I was. I think he was trying to prepare me for when the day came that they would not be here. Though, he advised that marriage to the right man would be a good thing for me. He would be happy to know that fate had found me the perfect man and that I had inadvertently followed his advice.”

Torin tucked his wife against him. “I wish I had gotten to meet your parents and for them to have gotten to know me so that they would know that their daughter would be well-loved and well-protected.”

“I would like to believe they know and are happy for me,” she said and grinned when her stomach grumbled.

“Did you not eat, wife?” he asked.

“I waited for you. Besides, my stomach would suffer no food while you were gone.”

“Then we eat and talk,” he said, “though it will probably be you talking the most.”

“I will temper my talk,” she said, and Torin laughed. “You shall see. I will do it.”

Torin laughed again.

Later that night, as they climbed into bed, Flora said on a yawn, “I need practice in curbing my tongue.”

Torin laughed, unable to stop... until his wife kissed him.

CHAPTER 26



“*M*ore stones crumble and will collapse if something isn’t done,” Flora said, her eyes on the sealed tower room door. “I know you are unsure, but your decision cannot wait much longer.”

Torin shook his head, amazed at how other stones showed signs of rapid decay since the last time he had stood before the sealed door. His wife voiced his troubling thought.

“One would think something was eating at it from the inside.”

Torin had paid little heed to the matter, more critical issues, like his wife’s safety, taking priority. But seeing this, he realized he had little choice but to decide what was to be done.

“What say you, wife?” he asked, valuing her opinion.

“I have no history with this room like your family. My curiosity would drive my decision, so I would unseal the room.”

He loved that his wife presented an honest opinion, admitting she viewed the decision far differently than he did.

“What if it was your family history? What then would your decision be?” he asked.

Flora thought a moment, continuing to stare at the crumbling stones. “I would think the crumbling stones had chosen for me. Something wants to be freed after all these years and I do not think whatever it is means harm. I believe it simply wishes to be freed.”

“Oddly enough, wife, I agree. It is time for the past to be freed and the present to start anew,” Torin said.

Flora turned a generous smile on her husband. “A wise choice made by a knowledgeable man.”

Torin gathered her in a hug. “I am glad that is finally settled. I will see it done in the next few days, since I do not know how many would willingly take on the task.”

“Lord Torin,” Anwen yelled up from the floor below. “You are needed in the Great Hall. A troop of Strathearn warriors approaches the bridge.”

“I will be right there,” Torin called back.

“My uncle is here?” Flora asked, her brow scrunching in question. “I do hope it is not unwelcome news and that all is well with Tavia and Fia as well.

“We will soon find out,” Torin said, heading to the Great Hall with his wife.

With almost a week gone by since they had discovered that Mordred had withdrawn from the area, there had been no attempts on Flora’s life and no campsites had been found in the woods. Torin still waited word on the men who had followed Mordred. So, he had yet to hear if what he thought might be the reason for the mercenary’s departure... the bounty no longer viable. Though what a Strathearn troop was doing here was puzzling.

Torin draped a cloak over his wife’s shoulders before donning one himself and leaving the keep to greet their visitors. He was surprised to see a small troop, no more than a dozen warriors, and no sight of Chieftain Newlin.

He did notice the look of surprise on his wife’s face when her eyes settled on one of the men in the troop. She hurried down the stairs before he could stop her. He rushed after her to hear her words clearly when the troop stopped.

“Henry, whatever are you doing here?” Flora asked, bewildered.

“I have come to collect my wife,” the plain-featured, tall, slim man said.

“Wife?” Flora asked, puzzled.

“Aye, Flora,” Henry said firmly. “You are my wife.”

Torin stepped forward, fury in his eyes. “Flora is my wife.”

Henry more slid off his horse than dismounted and faced Torin with a lift of his chin. “As well as you may believe that... it is not so. Flora’s da wed her to me in a proxy marriage before he left on his journey, worried he might not return. He wanted her well-cared for and knew I would see to that. He was aware we are well-suited for each other, and she would not object once she saw the reasonableness of it. He planned on telling her when he returned. Unfortunately, I only recently returned home from a lengthy journey and discovered her parents had died and that she was sent to live with her uncle in the Highlands. So, you see, our marriage preceded yours. Flora is my wife and I have come to take her home.”

Torin took hold of Flora’s arm and pulled her against him. “Flora is my wife, and she stays here with me.”

“I have documents to prove what I say, and I intend to see she leaves here with me,” Henry said with authority.

“I do not care what you think you have that proves Flora is your wife. She is not going anywhere with you,” Torin said with far greater authority.

“I do not want to go with you, Henry,” Flora said. “I am happily wed to Lord Torin, and I love him with all my heart. There is no way I will leave him.”

People had begun to gather around, many making faces when they heard Flora was not Lord Torin’s wife and smiling and nodding when Flora announced her love for her husband.

“It is not your decision, Flora. You are my wife and have a duty to me,” Henry said.

“Flora has no duty to you and if you persist to make outrageous demands, I will see that you are buried here in the Highlands,” Torin warned.

Henry stepped back, aghast at the threat.

“What are you doing here, Henry?” Walsh asked, walking over to him.

“Walsh!” Henry said, relieved. “Finally, a knowledgeable man who can explain the law to this heathen.”

Torin took a quick step toward Henry, sending him stumbling back in fright away from him. “I am the law here. And I can see you hanged if I so wish.”

Henry’s hand went to his throat, and he hurried a fearful look to Walsh. “You know how Ethan, Flora’s da, worried about his daughter if anything should happen to him. He saw to it that she would be taken care of by wedding her to me by proxy before leaving on his journey. Explain to this Highlander that Flora is legally bound to me.”

“I do not care what you say, or what legal right you think you have. The lowlander’s rules do not apply here in the Highlands,” Torin said before Walsh could speak. “

“Nonsense,” Henry argued. “The king’s rule applies throughout the country.”

“Try enforcing it,” Torin challenged.

Flora had stood silent listening to the exchange, trying to make sense of it all. She finally stepped around her husband to face Henry. “You waste your time here, Henry. I will not go with you. I will not be your wife. I declined your offer of marriage once and I decline it again. I will petition the church to annul our marriage.”

Anger jabbed at Torin hearing that his wife had rejected an offer of marriage to Henry once before this. She had never mentioned it to him, and he intended to speak with her about it.

“It would be easier to accept what is since you will need to go to Edinburgh to do that,” Henry said, keeping a calm demeanor while frustration showed on his face. “And there is no guarantee it will be granted.”

“Flora is not going anywhere,” Torin ordered, moving to stand beside his wife.

“Perhaps a magistrate could be brought here to confirm the documents Henry has and to see if the marriage can be absolved,” Walsh suggested.

“Whether it can be done or not, does not matter,” Torin argued. “My wife is not going anywhere.”

“Do you fear what a magistrate might conclude?” Henry asked.

“My husband fears nothing,” Flora said, her voice sharp to the surprise of all, even Henry. “He is a strong, courageous man who loves me and keeps me safe and there is no other man I will take as my husband. So, have a magistrate brought here for I will tell him the same thing I tell you. Not now nor will you ever be my husband.”

“I only do what your da asked of me,” Henry said, “but it appears obvious that you are adamant about remaining Lord Torin’s wife. Your da and mum wanted not only what was best for you but for you to be happy. They thought you might find that with me. I see that you have found it with Lord Torin. So, I believe it would be wise for all concerned if a magistrate was brought here and our marriage absolved, so we both will be free.”

“I always appreciated your wise choices, Henry,” Flora said, relieved. “If my husband grants permission, you are welcome to remain here until this matter is resolved.”

Torin was reluctant. He did not trust the man, but it was better he remained where he could keep watch over him rather than having him gone from his sight and not know what he might be plotting.

“He can stay. I will send someone to bring a magistrate here,” Torin said and turned to Kinnell. “Show, Henry, to a cottage, then see the Strathearn warriors fed and camped for the night. They can leave for home tomorrow morning.”

“They escort and protect me,” Henry protested.

“My warriors will see you returned to Clan Strathearn when we are done,” Torin ordered, leaving no doubt his word would be obeyed. “We will talk later at supper.”

Torin dismissed and commanded Henry in few words and having no other choice he followed Kinnell.

“How do you know Henry?” Flora asked Walsh as soon as the man was far enough away not to hear her.

“He was there, I believe, twice when I spoke with your da, though he thought me no more than an acquaintance of his. Your da held his tongue when it came to his missions.”

He was certainly right about that, the sting of her parents’ secret still disturbing her.

“And my da never mentioned his intention to wed me when he asked you to watch out for me?” Flora asked.

“Nay, not a word,” Walsh said.

“He lies,” Torin said, taking his wife’s hand and locking his firmly around hers. “From what you told me of your da, it does not seem likely he would wed you without first consulting you. Also, why ask Walsh to look after you if he wed you to Henry? That would be his responsibility as your husband. And what of a message? Your da would have surely left a message with Henry for you as he did with Walsh.”

“I thought the same,” Flora agreed. “How would my da not have a message for me if he wed me to Henry? And as you suggested, why would he ask Walsh to protect me if he had already wed me to Henry? Something just doesn’t seem right about it. But Henry has been a friend to my family, and I do not like to think he would deceive me. But why travel all the way here if it is nothing more than a lie?”

“I don’t trust him,” Torin said, his eyes still on Henry, though he was a good distance away.

Walsh chuckled. “I can understand that since he threatened to take your wife away.”

“Something that will never happen,” Torin warned. “I will see him dead first.”

“I don’t wish Henry to meet such a dire fate, but I do think he does not speak the truth, though I cannot understand why. He was always truthful, at least I believed so. Perhaps I have misjudged his character. I will learn more as we talk with him.”

“WE, wife. You are not to speak with him alone,” Torin ordered.

“As you say, husband.”

Torin stepped back to look wide-eyed at his wife, his hand still clasped to hers. “I do not think I have ever heard those words leave your mouth.”

“That is because on this we agree,” she explained, thinking it obvious. “We should speak with the Strathearn warrior who led the troop here to see if he has anything to tell us.”

“Something I intend to do while you remain in the keep,” Torin said.

“On that we do not agree,” Flora said and tugged at his hand. “Come, we do not want to waste time.”

Torin was about to stop her with a slight opposing tug when he thought better of it. He had a private question to ask her.

“You declined an offer of marriage to Henry?” he asked as they walked.

“Aye,” she said. “He thought with our shared interest in knowledge that we would pair well. My mum even advised me to consider it since she believed Henry a malleable man who would not make demands on me. But he was nothing more than a friend, and I could not see myself being anything more to him or him to me. Besides, I did not want to marry and be subject to a husband’s rule.”

“You must have been angry when you had no choice but to wed me.”

“To be honest, Torin, I believe I was quite numb to everything after my parents died and I learned that I had to travel to the wild Highlands and live with an uncle I did not

know, an uncle who would have complete say over me, over my future. An uncle who wed me to a Highlander I had only met and sent me off to live my life with him. It was terrifying and yet fate knew better and brought us together and I will be forever grateful.”

Torin pulled his wife into his arms and kissed her. “You are mine. Now and always.”

“Aye, husband, I am,” she confirmed, realizing he needed to hear it and needing to hear it herself.

“Let’s see this done and take some private time for ourselves before supper,” Torin suggested with a teasing smile.

“Aye, I have been thinking about riding you again. I quite enjoyed it,” she said, wrapping her arm around his and leaning slightly against him as they continued to walk.

“Bloody hell, wife,” he grumbled low so no one could hear. “Talk like that flashes an image in my head that turns me hard.”

“Good,” she said with a sweet grin.

“You wish me to suffer?”

“I wish for you to have a reason to hurry us to the keep, for I am already wet for you.”

“Damn,” he mumbled and turned them around to head to the keep. “I will send for the fellow later.” As soon as she went to speak, he hurried to say, “And do not tell me it is a wise choice. It is a necessary one... an extremely necessary one.”

“I was not going to say that, though you are right. I was going to suggest that we hasten our pace. I have a desperate need for you, husband.”

Torin grinned, scooped his wife up, tossing her over his shoulder, and rushed to the keep.

* * *

“AND YOUR UNCLE sent no word with this Henry?” Iona asked, having joined Flora at the dais.

“Only that Henry arrived there with important news for me and so my uncle sent him here,” Flora said, watching her husband make his way through the Great Hall talking with the Strathearn warriors who had been invited to sup here along with some of the clan’s warriors and Walsh’s men as well.

“Henry talks easily with the men,” Iona said, seeing him in conversation with a couple of mercenaries.

“He seeks to learn things from them. He will be the talk of Edinburgh among his colleagues when he returns and is invited to give talks on his experience in the Highlands.”

“Then his trip will not be completely in vain,” Iona said. “You do realize your husband will never let anyone take you from him, don’t you? He will battle for you if necessary.”

“I, myself, would never let anyone take me from him and I do not want him to battle and chance losing his life. This will be settled civilly, and Henry sent on his way,” Flora said and pushed a tankard away that a servant had sat in front of her on the table.

“No more drink for you?” Iona asked.

Flora patted her stomach. “I cannot put another bit of drink or food in me. I am stuffed.” She pushed the tankard to Iona. “Have it if you’d like.”

Iona took the tankard, enjoying the drink. She licked her lips after several swallows and scrunched her brow.

“Something wrong?” Flora asked.

“The taste,” Iona said, and her eyes went wide as her hand went to her stomach.

“Iona,” Flora asked anxiously, realizing something was amiss.

“Poison,” Iona said as she stumbled to her feet, mumbling something to Flora.

Flora rushed out of the chair as Iona toppled toward her, and she screamed out, “TORIN, POISON!”

CHAPTER 27



*K*innell rushed to the dais, reaching it before Torin did and vaulted over the table to take Iona in his arms before Torin reached his wife's side. He sank to the floor with her, his heart beating madly in his chest when he saw her fight to keep her eyes open.

"Don't you die on me, Iona," Kinnell shouted at her as if she could not hear him. "You cannot die before we have a chance to love, marry, have bairns, and grow old together. Do you hear me? I will not have it. You will not leave me. I have been a fool. I should have told you sooner. I should not have wasted time." He bent his head and kissed her brow. "Please, Iona, please, I beg you. Do not leave me."

Tears pooled in Iona's fluttering eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks, trailing slowly down them.

"Henry!" Flora shouted to her husband's dismay. "Black henbane," she repeated what Iona had mumbled to her. "Do you recall it?"

"Aye," Henry said, having hurried forward. "That scholar from Innerbrook believed it could keep a person from feeling horrific pain. Unfortunately, through trial and error he discovered too much would kill a person. How much did she drink?"

Flora pointed to the tankard for him to have a look and realized the drink was meant for her.

Henry peered into the tankard. "It remains more than half full. She may only sleep, though it depends on how much was

used. Only time will tell.”

“There is nothing that can be done for her?” Kinnell begged with desperation, hugging Iona’s limp body against him.

“Time. She will either wake or she will slip into a deep sleep and wake no more,” Henry said.

“Iona did not even drink half,” Flora said, trying to reassure Kinnell and herself and silently praying that Iona would survive.

“I will take her to her cottage,” Kinnell said. “When she wakes, she can tell me what to do to help her.”

Torin summoned several warriors to assist him and guard Kinnell, but Kinnell let no one near Iona, keeping her tucked tight in his arms as he carried her out of the keep, whispering to her as he went.

“It was meant for me,” Flora said, turning to her husband, his arm tight around her. “I was too full to eat or drink and offered it to Iona. It is my fault.”

“It is not your fault. You had no way of knowing it was poisoned. Who gave it to you?” Torin asked, fury and fright raging in him, thinking how close he had come to losing his wife and that the attempts on her life continued and far too close at home.

“I do not recall. I was busy talking with Iona.”

“Who gave the tankard to Lady Flora?” Torin shouted.

A trembling servant stepped forward.

“Did someone tell you to give the tankard to Lady Flora?” Torin asked.

“Aye, sir, Verena,” the young woman said.

Verena was quickly fetched.

“Why did you give a specific tankard to my wife?” Torin demanded, impatient for an answer as to how the poison reached her.

“Hadwin gave me some dried leaves he told me Lady Flora might like, so I brewed them separately for her to try.”

“It was poison,” Torin said, and Verena gasped. “Iona drank some and fell ill.”

Verena turned pure white. “I did not know, my lord, I swear I did not know.”

“I will get Hadwin,” Walsh said and rushed from the room, a nod from Torin had two of his warriors following him. He did not know who to trust, so he would trust no one.

He helped his wife to sit, worried by her silence. He expected to hear her chatter endlessly to try and determine what had happened, but she did not say a word.

Hadwin entered with a worried look on his face. “You wished to see me, my lord?”

Torin picked up the tankard with the poison brew in it. “You gave Verena leaves to brew a special drink for Lady Flora?”

“I did. I was going through my cart, searching for a fur-lined cloak I had acquired and came across the sack of leaves I bought from another merchant. I remembered he said the leaves soothed and with all Lady Flora has been through lately I thought they might help her.”

“Have you tasted the brew?” Torin asked.

“I have, my lord. I would never sell a brew I have not tasted myself. I thought it quite soothing,” Hadwin said.

Torin handed the tankard to him. “Verena made a tankard for her. Is this the brew?”

Hadwin took it without hesitation and raised it to his mouth.

Torin snatched it from his hand. “That is all, Hadwin, your action told me what I needed to know.”

“I do not understand, sir,” Hadwin said.

“This tankard of your brew was poisoned,” Torin said.

Hadwin's eyes rounded in shock and his hand went to his chest. "Poison? I know nothing of poison, my lord." He hurried a glance to Flora. "My lady, I would never harm you."

"I never thought you would, Hadwin," she said with a gentle smile. "I would guess the poison was somehow slipped into the drink or possibly mixed with the leaves while in the kitchen." Flora looked to Verena. "Bring the pouch of leaves here, Verena. We do not want anyone else falling ill if the poison has been mixed with the leaves."

The woman nodded and hurried off.

"Sit and have some ale, Hadwin," Flora said, seeing the man tremble.

"Thank you, my lady," he said and with a bob of his head to Lord Torin, he went to a table and sat, a servant filling a tankard for him.

"Drink and eat," Torin called out, to the warriors who had remained silent throughout the ordeal. "All is being seen to and the culprit will be caught, on that you have my word."

A cheer rang out and soon talk returned but no laughter was heard as before.

Henry stepped closer to the dais, keeping his voice low. "I am sure you know that Walsh fellow is a mercenary, which alone makes him untrustworthy. And it makes me wonder how he was ever friends with your da. If I had not seen with my own eyes that he knew your da, I would be skeptical to believe they shared a friendship. Unless, of course, it wasn't friendship that brought them together and your da somehow became beholden to the man and was forced to help him in only God knows what nefarious ways."

"Did you ever see him anywhere other than with my da?" Flora asked.

Henry shook his head. "His kind would not be tolerated in the presence of those we know."

"You mean Highlanders?" Torin asked, anger flaring in his eyes.

“I should take my leave,” Henry said. “It has been a tiring day.” He hurried off without saying another word.

Torin sat beside his wife and reached out for her hand, and she grasped it tight. “Are you all right?”

“I fear for Iona’s life and for my own since whoever wishes me dead is here among us.”

“And may have just arrived,” Torin said.

“Or could have always been here and with his opponents dispatched, he can now finish the job without interference and claim the bounty.”

* * *

FLORA WOKE in her husband’s arms the next morning and with a nightdress on. She had woken from a dream shivering and he had insisted she put it on to get warm. She argued but, in the end, he had won, having gotten it himself and more forced than helped her into it.

“I should take this off,” she said, eager to feel the heat of his body against hers.

He was quick to shake his head. “Nay, it is cold, leave it on.”

She tilted her head up at him. “You are usually eager to have me naked.”

“I am but there is so much going on now it is not the time for either of us to be distracted.”

She smiled. “I distract you?”

“All the time,” he said, his smile broad and teasing.

Her hand roamed over his chest, always enjoying the feel of his hard muscles, then drifted farther down.

He grabbed her wrist, stopping her. “I do not want to start something we may not be able to finish, or my thoughts will be distracted all day.”

“Why wouldn’t we be able to finish?” she asked, itching to touch him.

A rap at the door had Torin saying, “Interruptions. We have suffered enough of them.”

“My lord and lady, Iona is awake and asking for you both,” Anwen called out.

“We will be right there,” Flora called back then pulled her wrist free and took a quick hold of his aroused manhood and gave it a squeeze. “We finish this later, husband.”

“I won’t argue with that,” he said and slipped out of bed along with his wife.

They were dressed and down in the Great Hall quickly, both eager to see Iona.

Torin tucked his wife’s hood up low over her head once they stepped outside and the wind hit them.

“I would not be surprised if more than one moan rips through the keep today,” Flora said as she tucked herself close against her husband’s side to combat the bone-chilling wind.

“I never thought I would appreciate the ghostly moan, but I quite enjoy the private time it affords us,” he admitted, doing his best to block the wind from whipping at his wife.

Flora’s cheeks were stung red by the time they entered Iona’s cottage. She was glad to see the woman sitting up in bed, but looking worn and tired, not something usually seen on her. Kinnell sat in a chair close to the bed.

“Don’t even think about getting out of bed to greet them,” Kinnell ordered.

“I wasn’t going to,” Iona said.

“And I was going to make sure you didn’t,” Kinnell fired back.

“Be grateful you did not lose her last night, for I am grateful she saved my wife’s life by drinking that brew,” Torin said.

“Black henbane. It is used by many healers for a variety of things, but with great care for it can poison fatally in copious quantities. I was not sure how much I had ingested. I knew forced sleep would claim me but did not know if I would ever wake again.”

“Fate had other plans for you,” Flora said and glanced from Iona to Kinnell.

Iona smiled. “An easier solution would have worked for me, but nonetheless I appreciate fate’s plan.”

“What plan?” Kinnell demanded. “It better include me because I am not letting you go. You are mine now.”

Iona’s smile broadened and reached her hand out to Kinnell.

He took it and held it tight.

“I woke hours ago, thankfully. When the fog that engulfed me finally dissipated, I had Kinnell get me the pouch of suspected leaves. The henbane is mixed in with leaves that cause no harm.”

“I will see it is disposed of so it can do no further harm,” Torin said.

“I would prefer to keep it, my lord,” Iona said. “It could offer help in certain situations if care and knowledge is taken when using it. It is not easy to come by, growing by the sea and in sandy soil.”

“So, whoever had this henbane had to have spent time by the sea,” Torin said.

“Unless someone had given it to the person,” Flora said, “and he also would have had to have good reason to visit the kitchen.”

“Walsh can be found there picking up Philip’s food now and again and I have seen him talking often with Anwen,” Kinnell said.

“Hadwin is another who visits the kitchen often, talking with Verena,” Iona said.

“I tested Hadwin to see if he would drink the brew prepared for Flora and he raised it to his lips,” Torin said.

“He could have chanced you would stop him in order to protect himself,” Kinnell said.

“Then there is Henry,” Torin said.

“Who only arrived and does not even know where the kitchen is located,” Kinnell said.

“But he did know of black henbane,” Torin reminded.

“The question still begs... why would someone want me dead?” Flora said.

* * *

“VERENA TASTED the brew from the pot before she allowed me to bring it to you,” Anwen said, placing the tankard on the table in the Great Hall.

Flora hurried her chilled hands around the heated tankard. “Please tell, Verena I am most grateful.”

Anwen nodded, then hurried off to tend to her task.

The cold, whipping wind had left Flora shivering by the time Torin returned her to the keep’s door and she wanted nothing more than to warm herself by the hearth. She would wait to eat until her husband returned. He had gone to talk with Walsh and had sent Kinnell to speak with Hadwin. He intended for her to be present when he spoke again with Henry. Afterwards Kinnell would join them in Torin’s solar and they would discuss the conversations hoping to find even the smallest clue that would help them find the culprit and solve this puzzling mystery.

Her thoughts drifted to last night when she woke from another dream of her mum and da. This time, she searched frantically for her parents, sensing they were in danger and terrified she would not reach them in time to save them. She had been relieved to wake in her husband’s warm arms, having felt chilled to the bone.

“I would love to know your thoughts, since I learned when you get lost in them you find solutions to things,” Henry said and nodded at the bench opposite her at the table. “May I join you?”

Her husband’s warning of not talking alone with Henry sounded in her head, but it would be rude to deny him, and she was not alone, several servants were busy replacing candles and setting the dais table with a clean white cloth.

“Please do,” Flora said, trying to make sense of why Henry might be a foe rather than a friend.

“A couple of days here and while the Highlands certainly fascinate, I still cannot understand why you would give up life in Edinburgh or England for that matter. Life teems in those places. Knowledge is around every corner and its power grows, scholarly men helping to forge a wise leadership. Your da was one of them. Many respected his opinions. His lecture rooms overflowed with men eager to hear him speak. Do you not miss those days? Would you not like to partake of them again? I would bring you along with me to lectures just as your da did. You could continue to gain the knowledge you sought with such passion.”

“There was a time I would have thought I could have lived no other way, Henry. But then I knew no other way of life and now I realize it was an insulated life. Here in the Highlands a vastness of knowledge was opened to me, and I wake every day looking forward to what I will learn, to talk with the family I have gained, and most importantly to share a loving future with my husband. But enough of that, Henry, tell me what you have been doing. You mentioned a trip. Why did you go?”

“France,” he said.

“That is where my mum and da were. Did you see them there?”

“They were in Paris. I was on the coast,” he said. “I was devastated when I returned and found out they had died, and you were gone. I wish I could have been there for you. Things would have been different if I had been.”

“Lord Simon helped me a great deal. I do not know what I would have done without him.”

Henry reached out and rested his hand over Flora’s. “I am sorry to tell you this, but it was not long after you departed Edinburgh that Lord Simon died unexpectedly.”

“Oh no!” Flora said, aghast at the news. “He was such a good friend to my da and mum, and to me as well. What happened to him?”

“I was told the physicians believe it was his heart. It just gave out. Though I am a scholarly man and would accept their word, I believe his heart broke and never healed after losing Lady Adare.”

“On that we agree, Henry,” Flora said, her heart aching for a friend she had deeply respected.

“I hear you have a ghost in the keep,” Henry said with a chuckle. “You know that is nonsense. There are no such things as ghosts.”

As if Henry’s word had insulted, a powerful roar ripped through the Great Hall with such force, it blew out all the candles, almost doused the hearth’s flames, and turned the room icy cold. The servants did not hesitate, they ran screaming out of the keep.

And so did Henry.

CHAPTER 28



Flora sat alone in the Great Hall for a moment and was pleased when Anwen entered, looking not at all frightened.

“I feared this would happen with how bad the wind is today, my lady.”

“I expected it as well, Anwen,” Flora said as she got to her feet. “Give them time to calm, then see that they return to their tasks. They need to learn there is nothing to fear in the keep, though I will admit that was the strongest moan yet.”

“And unlike the others, more sorrowful,” Anwen said. “You will remain here, my lady?”

“Aye, Anwen, and please tell my husband if you should see him that I have gone to the tower. I worry what the forceful wind might have done to those crumbling stones.”

“You should not go there alone, my lady,” Anwen cautioned.

“There is nothing to fear there, Anwen. I will be fine.”

“I will get the message to Lord Torin, right after I speak with and calm the servants,” Anwen said and hurried off.

Flora reached for one of the smaller torches in the Great Hall as she headed to the stairs, thinking how Anwen was right. The moan was unlike the others, sorrow heavy in it. She climbed the staircase cautiously suspecting the wind most likely blew out some, if not all, of the torches along the stairwell.

As she suspected, she stopped to light a few torches along the way. She was surprised that Henry ran as he did. His tempered manner sometimes could be misconstrued for lack of strength but being a knowledgeable man, certain things would not easily frighten him. She had expected curiosity from him, not retreat. She stopped, her brow wrinkling as she tried to recall a memory about Henry. Was it something he did? Something he said? Something said about him?

I do not believe Henry would be a suitable husband for Flora.

She had forgotten that she had heard Lord Simon say that as she waited outside his solar for them to leave for the abbey while he spoke privately with someone. But who? Her da and mum had already left for France.

Henry would know how to handle her never-ending chatter, even with her words being much like weapons, hitting her mark every time.

That was where she had heard that remark, but who had said it? She struggled to remember.

Flora only aims and hits at those deserving of it, and I doubt any man would tolerate it for long, even your nephew. I regret to say that I cannot help you in your endeavor to see Henry wed Flora.

Henry's uncle!

She shook her head unable to recall his name. Henry barely mentioned him. She had never seen him at gatherings. Actually, she had never met the man. Why would he approach Lord Simon for help and had he done so on Henry's behest? He couldn't have if what Henry says is true and her da had wed her to him. Unless Henry never spoke of the marriage to his uncle.

She started up the steps again, her mind churning. Was it a coincidence that he had been in France the same time as her parents? But he had been on the coast, a distance from Paris where they had been.

The coast.

Flora stopped again, Iona's words rushing into her head.

Growing by the sea and sandy soil.

Where one would find black henbane.

She turned to head back down. She had to tell Torin. He must know immediately. She did not want to believe it, but she feared Henry was the one who wanted her dead, though she still did not understand why.

She barely took a few steps when she heard footfalls rushing up the stairs. Anwen must have told Torin and he came to see if she was safe.

"Torin!" she called out. "I think I know the culprit. I think it's—" Her mouth clamped shut when Henry came around the curve.

He smiled and shook his head. "I knew it was only a matter of time before you figured it out."

She silently admonished herself for failing to make it a priority for her husband to teach her how to defend herself in any given situation. But once Torin learned she was in the keep alone, he would not fail to seek her out. She had to stay alive long enough for him to reach her and she had only one weapon to use... her words.

"I do not understand, explain it to me, Henry," she said, encouraging him to talk.

"If you think to delay so your husband can come rescue you, you are wrong. He is in a lively debate with Walsh and paying heed to no one else."

Her heart felt as if it stopped for a moment, but she would not allow the news to defeat her. Henry was unaware that Anwen would speak with Torin after she spoke with the servants. She simply had to survive until her husband reached her, no matter what it took.

"Then you have time to satisfy my curiosity," she said, keeping her fear from her voice.

"I always admired your courage and audacity. You would have made me a good wife... until I did not need you

anymore.”

Flora saw whatever Henry had never shown before, arrogance and anger. “You have worn a mask all this time.”

“And it has not been easy, showing a weak side while befriending people I found loathsome.”

“Was my da one of them?” she asked.

“Not until I discovered he spied for the king.” Henry’s brow shot up when he did not get the shocked response he had expected. “It is no surprise to you.” He shook his head. “Walsh told you, a spy himself. Though, not a good one since he never realized I spy for England.”

“England? Whyever, would you spy for England?”

“It is my mother’s homeland and through the years I have come to love it. It is a powerful country, and it expands its power to grow even larger and like others who are true Englishmen, I will do whatever I can to assist and see it victorious in all its endeavors. That means making sure no spies obtained any valid information that could hurt England.”

“The reason you want me dead. You fear my da shared information with me before he died,” she said, it beginning to make sense.

“Nay, I made sure your da and mum would be too ill to speak of anything with you.”

Flora rushed a hand to her stomach, feeling as if he had punched her there, realizing what he alluded to. “You poisoned my parents?”

“They left me no choice. I engaged a fellow spy to poison a few members of your da’s group in France, then had the poison fed to your parents slowly so they would be ill and beyond help upon their arrival home, leaving nothing nefarious to be suspected. You see, what information your da discovered would have eventually led to me and I could not allow that to happen.”

Her hand fisted in anger at her waist that he had taken her parents from her when they had so much life left in them yet.

“But I had no hand in putting a bounty on your head. That was my uncle’s doing, my mother’s brother, a useless sot. I was the one who had the bounty rescinded. Upon Lord Simon’s death, my uncle discovered that since he had no family, Simon named you as sole beneficiary of his estate and wealth. You are a wealthy woman, Flora.”

“But women cannot inherit—”

“Lord Simon was a wise man. He claimed you as his ward after your parents died and made provisions for you to inherit everything. I believe he wanted you to have the freedom denied to women. Naturally, when you wed your husband would have access to your wealth. My uncle saw this as an opportunity and had a false marriage document created showing we were wed upon your parents’ death. He then placed an extremely large bounty on your head so that I would inherit everything, thinking I would be pleased and share it with him.”

“You were not pleased?”

“I found his plan enticing, but not how he imagined it. I had the bounty rescinded immediately, saw to it that I would never be troubled by my idiot uncle ever again, though I took advantage of the opportunity he had given me. I planned to rescue you from a life I believed you abhorred here in the Highlands and make good use of your money to help me with my missions... until I could take your endless chattering no longer.”

“But love ruined your plans,” Flora said.

“When your uncle told me he had you wed to a Highlander, I thought for sure you would be relieved to see me and learn we were wed, and eagerly embrace our marriage and return home. Never would I have expected you to fall in love with a barbarian.”

“So, you had no choice but to see me dead.”

“I simply had to adapt my plans. I was not about to lose all that wealth.”

“And how do you plan to escape after killing me?” she asked.

“I did not kill you, dear heart. You had a tragic accident. You fell down the stairs and broke your neck.”

“My husband will never believe that.”

“What choice will he have when I am there beside him as he discovers your body?” Henry said with a smug grin and stepped toward her.

Several possible ways to escape had run through her head, none being sensible or successful. She let instinct take over and caught him off guard as she raised her foot to deliver a powerful kick to his chest, sending him tumbling down the stairs. Fearful she would not make it past him safely, she headed up the stairs, praying her husband would come to her rescue.

Where did she hide? The thought ran through her head, but hearing Henry get to his feet with a groan and a curse kept her in flight until she reached the tower room.

She had trapped herself... until.

She saw that several stones had crumbled in decay along the side of the sealed door to the point that they had fallen out. It was a slim space to slip through, but she had no choice. She tossed the torch down the stairs, leaving the area in darkness and felt her way to the slim opening and with earnest effort and suffering some scrapes she slipped through and into the room.

* * *

“YOU THINK ME INVOLVED SOMEHOW, but I tell you and will continue to tell you that I am here to do as Flora’s da asked of me... to keep his daughter safe,” Walsh said.

Anwen went to interrupt for the second time and once again, Torin waved his hand to silence her.

“Ethan had found information pertaining to a possible spy sent from England while on another mission. The king was anxious to finally discover the elusive man’s identity. Word reached Ethan that the man might be in France looking for information. He used a gathering of scholars as an excuse to travel to Paris and see what he could find out. And I shouldn’t even be sharing that with you, but I doubt you care about such information.”

“Henry was in France, but on the coast,” Anwen said, not waiting for permission to speak.

Torin turned to her. “Where did you learn that?”

“I heard him tell Lady Flora.”

“He is with her?” Torin asked anxiously.

“That is what I came to tell you. The wind sent a powerful moan through the keep and everyone there ran out, including Henry.”

“My wife is alone in the keep?” Torin asked, already heading that way, Anwen and Walsh following.

“The last I saw, but I hurried to tell you as soon as I gave the servants Lady Flora’s orders,” Anwen said.

“Has anyone seen the man who arrived with the Strathearn warriors the other day?” Torin called out as he kept a quick pace to the keep.

“I saw him,” Philip called out.

Torin stopped.

Philip pointed. “He was entering the keep.”

Torin took off running, Walsh and Anwen not far behind him.

* * *

FLORA BUMPED into things as she made her way into the dark room. A quick touch here and there identified them, a chest, a chair, the edge of a bed. Her quick assessment made her

realize it had been a bedchamber, not a place of torture. She felt along the bedding and pulled her hand back when she touched what she thought was a leg. Someone was in the bed. She bravely let her hand roam again and discovered it was a skeleton. Someone had been sealed in here and she could not imagine the horrific death the person must have suffered.

“Flora!”

She jumped at the sound of Henry’s shout that had gotten closer. She had to find a place to hide until her husband got to her. But why was it dark in here. There should be some light even with the gray skies outside. The shutters surely had rotted away by now. She looked up to see if she could spot the windows. She could see nothing, and it dawned on her then. The door not only had been sealed with stone but the windows as well.

So, what caused the wind to moan through the keep with this room so tightly sealed?

A chill rushed over her turning her skin to gooseflesh. What if it was a ghost, not that of the giant but of the skeleton in the bed?

Her head snapped toward the light that suddenly filtered through the slim opening she had slipped through.

“Why do you have to make things so difficult, Flora?” Henry said as he peered through the narrow opening.

She heard a stone fall.

“Wonderful, the mortar has decayed enough that several of the stones topple when given a hard shove. I will join you shortly.” Another stone fell. “I will be sure to shed tears when I tell your husband that you pushed at the stone, and you fell in the room striking your head before I could reach you.”

She could not let that happen. She had to stay strong. A weapon. Could there possibly be a weapon in the room? That would have been the kind thing to do for the person who had been left here to die, leave a weapon so he would not suffer a lingering death.

Suddenly, she heard stone after stone collapse, the light from the torch growing brighter until... a strong wind rushed from the room extinguishing the flame. Though with the room completely sealed, where it could have originated Flora could not fathom.

Curses flew from Henry's mouth and Flora rushed to press herself back against the wall. Her fingertips brushed along a small bowl almost knocking it over. She gripped it tight, not sure how it would help, but not letting go of it. She braced herself against the wall and realized her only chance was to sneak past Henry as he ventured farther into the room and hurry out before he realized she was gone. But could she do it quietly enough for him not to hear her?

"FLORA! Torin's roar echoed up the stairs.

"Damn!" Henry muttered. "I should have known better than to follow my idiot uncle's scheme. Now we both die for I will not be taken alive."

"FLORA!" Torin shouted, sounding closer.

A few moments were all she needed and when she heard Henry move, she threw the bowl. He lunged at the sound, and she remained tight against the wall as she made her way to the door. She stopped a moment hearing a gurgling sound then she spotted a weak light coming from what was left of the unsealed door and she rushed to it, screaming for her husband.

"TORIN!"

Light suddenly flashed in the room and Flora stopped where she was staring at the bed.

Henry lay atop the skeleton, his neck impaled by a bone, blood everywhere, and his eyes wide in death.

CHAPTER 29



Torin took his wife in his arms as soon as he entered the room, relieved he had not been too late. His wildly beating heart began to slow as he held her tight against him, assuring himself she was safe.

“I am well, husband, worry not,” Flora reassured him. “I knew you would come once Anwen told you I was alone here. I just needed to bide my time.”

He kissed her gently, then rested his brow against hers. “I love you, Flora, and never do I want to live without you.”

“We have already settled that, Torin. We will die within a brief time of each other just as my parents... She closed her eyes thinking what Henry had done to them.

“Flora?” Torin questioned when she suddenly grew quiet, and he eased his head back to see she had shut her eyes.

She opened her eyes and smiled faintly. “I have much to tell you, but first you must see this.”

Torin released her reluctantly and stepped aside to look at what she was eager for him to see.

He was not the only one who stared in bewilderment at the bed. Walsh stood holding the torch he carried high to cast better light. Kinnell did the same, having followed when he spotted Torin and Walsh rushing to the keep.

Flora approached the bed, glancing around as she did, seeing things that told her a story and left her with far too many questions.

“It is a woman in the bed, and she saved my life,” Flora said. She stepped closer to peer down at the skeleton and Henry. “I heard him trip. When he fell on her, her bones must have snapped at the wrist, sending her arm bone shooting up and into his neck.”

Kinnell shivered. “It looks more like she grabbed him and shoved the bone into him.”

“She is dead. That would not be possible,” Walsh said, continuing to stare at the strange scene.

“Maybe, but don’t tell me that it doesn’t look that way to you,” Kinnell argued.

Walsh ignored him, though his shudder responded for him.

“I wonder who she is and what she did to be sealed away,” Kinnell said.

“Whoever she is, she died here giving birth and this is her shrine,” Flora said.

“How do you know that?” Torin asked.

“Look around,” she said. “There is an empty cradle, the remnants of the wreath that once adorned her head crumbled and now mixed with what hair she has left on her head. Her arms have been folded over her chest and I would not be surprised to find remnants of flowers there once Henry’s body is removed. Whoever this woman was, she was well-loved, the man who loved her not letting her go even in death.”

“My great-grandda, Lord Dermid,” Torin said.

“It is time she is freed,” Flora said, “and properly buried.”

They all stood quiet a moment as if in respect to the woman in the bed.

Walsh was the first to speak. “So, Henry put the bounty on your head?”

“Nay,” Flora said, returning to her husband’s side. “It is quite a tale to tell... secrets, spies, poison, lies, and more.”

“I am eager to hear it all, wife,” Torin said, then looked to Walsh and Kinnell. “Can you both see that Henry is removed

from here? I do not want anyone knowing what was found in this room just yet. “Lady Flora and I will await you both in my solar where we can hear the tale together.”

After assuring Anwen she was unharmed when she entered the Great Hall, Flora ordered food and drink brought to Torin’s solar and the servants returned to their duties in the keep.

Torin took his wife in his arms once they were alone in his solar. “Is there anything you wish to tell only me before the others join us?”

Flora was grateful her husband had considered she might not want to share all Henry had told her. There was one thing she wanted him to know before the others.

“I am wealthy,” she said.

Torin looked confused, his brow narrowing. “Wealthy?”

“Aye,” she said. “Lord Simon died and left me his wealth, that is the reason Henry lied about he and I being wed. He wanted my wealth. Simon left it to me so I would have the freedom denied to women... to live as I choose.”

Torin stepped away from her, a strange look on his face, then ran his hand through his hair, and shook his head. “Then choose.”

Flora appeared as confused as her husband. “Choose what?”

“Choose whether you wish to stay wed to me or to leave and live your life as you prefer. I will not hold you to a marriage that was chosen for you. Choose. Now.”

“You give me a choice?” she asked.

“Aye, I do,” he said. “You had no other option but to wed me when I offered marriage. You have a choice now. I want you to make it freely. I want to know you stay wed to me because you want to be wed to me. That it is your choice to be my wife. So, leave or stay. It is up to you.”

Flora stared at him a moment, then smiled. “That is noble of you, husband, giving me a choice and I do appreciate it. But I fear you are stuck with me since I love you far too much to

ever walk away from you. Besides,” she said, her hand going to her stomach. “There is a chance I am with child.”

Torin’s eyes shot wide, and he once again gathered his wife in his arms. “But you told me you were taking something to prevent that.”

“I stopped not long after we first made love. I was that sure I wanted to stay with you, bear you many bairns, and continue to love you beyond life itself.”

He kissed her quick. “I am beyond thrilled at such news and I am relieved that you chose to stay with me since I truly do not know if I could have let you go.”

“And I, husband, never intend to let you go,” she said and hugged him tight to prove it.

A rap at the door had Anwen entering with the food and drink and it was not long after that Walsh and Kinnell entered.

“Sit,” Flora said, pointing to the chairs while she stood before the hearth. “There is much to tell you.”

* * *

THE MYSTERY of the tower room kept people talking three weeks later, the clan speculating who the woman was and what happened to the bairn that she may have had. And why no one ever knew about her. Her bones had been collected, wrapped, and stored for burial in the spring when the ground was soft enough to dig a grave.

Torin did not like to think that it would be necessary for his wife to travel to Edinburgh to claim her inheritance and Walsh suggested that with his connection to top officials, and the king himself, he might be able to see it done for her. Though, he had a stipulation. When he returned, he wished to remain with Clan Norham. Henry saw to it that his spying days were done, and he was tired of his mercenary days as well. He wished to settle down and take a wife.

Flora knew Walsh spoke of Anwen, but that was between the two of them to work out.

Kinnell and Iona were doing well. She had fully recovered from the poison, and they had plans to wed.

No wind had roared through the keep since the room had been opened and all believed that they would hear it no more since the unknown woman was finally freed. Though some believed it was the giant's strong breath that helped her.

Flora smiled thinking how the tale of the giant would forever live strong on the Isle of Outerson and in the Clan Norham.

Snow was falling lightly when she knocked on Philip's door and he greeted her with a smile, having expected her.

"There has been so much excitement of late, I feared you would not have time to visit," Philip said as Flora poured them both a brew and spread the folded cloth to reveal slices of honey bread.

Flora took a bite of one, knowing Philip would not touch the bread until she did.

They talked about various things, shared in laughter, and relaxed in silence.

"I have something to show you, Philip. I found it when cleaning out the tower room." Flora said and pulled something out of a pouch that hung from her belt. She spread a small scrape of cloth out. In the middle was embroidered, quite skillfully, a horse. She smiled softly. "In Latin, Philip means fond of horses."

Philip stared at it, tears pooling in his eyes. He got up slowly from the table and went to a small chest and took something from it. He returned to the table and after sitting, unfolded a cloth identical to the cloth Flora had laid on the table.

"She was your mother, wasn't she, Philip?" Flora said. "You are Lord Dermid's son."

Tears slipped down Philip's aged cheeks as he nodded. "Shortly before Lord Dermid died, he came upon me fishing and told me we needed to talk. He explained everything to me, and then gave me this cloth. My mum, Annora, had

embroidered it for me while waiting for me to be born. She knew she would have a son and she had chosen my name. She believed it a good name for a gentle yet strong soul much like the nature of a horse. My da told me that I was like my mum, a gentle yet strong soul. He said I had her eyes, but he was relieved I did not possess her magic.”

“She was a witch?” Flora whispered as if someone might hear.

“Many believed so, not so my da. He believed her a wise woman and loved her with all his heart. His world shattered when she died giving birth to me. She warned him she would die but he refused to believe her. She told him what needed to be done to save me and that one day they would be together again.” He wiped at his falling tears. “My mother told him to send me away after I was born and have me stay away for at least two years, then have me returned here. But never ever was he to acknowledge that I was his son, for there would be those who believed her son evil as they did her and would want me dead. I was given to a woman who could be trusted and who would do as my da asked, and she did just that. My da looked after me from afar, doing as my mum asked and told me to forever keep the secret unless the room was unsealed in my time.

Flora waited when Philip grew silent for a moment.

“My da came upon my mum one day deep in the woods and fell in love with her. He visited with her often and he told me they had three glorious years together, then she got with child, and something happened that placed her life in danger. That was when he brought her to hide in the tower room. He purposely let rumors spread that it was a place of torture so that no one would go near it. There were two servant women my mum trusted, one of them is the woman I was given to.”

“He sealed your mum away to keep her safe even in death,” Flora said.

“Nay,” Philip said. “My mum instructed him to seal her away once she passed and instructed him to make sure no one

unsealed the room. She told him the room would release her when the time was right.”

Tears ran down Flora’s cheeks and she stretched her hand out to take hold of Philip’s hand. “And it did. Your mum saved my life.”

“And now she is finally free,” Philip said. “Does Lord Torin know?”

“Not yet, but I am sure he would like to know he has a granduncle. You will join us for supper tonight and you can tell him all about it.”

“I would like that for it means my mum’s prediction comes true. She told my da that one day in the far future I would be welcomed into the keep and accepted as family.

“And so you shall, Philip, so you shall,” Flora said as they shared tears together.

* * *

“I STILL CANNOT BELIEVE I have an uncle,” Torin said as he and Flora lay in bed together later that night. “I am so glad he lived these many years. I have so many questions for him.”

“You asked quite a few of him at supper,” Flora said.

“I am hungry to know it all, though I find it difficult to believe that my grandda, Lord Hamish, knew nothing about it. He was twelve and two years at the time and no doubt curious.”

“If he did know, he wisely kept the secret which meant he kept his half-brother safe,” Flora said.

“I so wondered what had turned my great-grandda into an unkind man when he had once been a good one. It is good to know that he was not evil like some said. He was just a man angry at the loss of the woman he loved. I wish I could say the same about my da. He had no excuse for being unkind. He simply cared for no one but himself.” He turned on his side to face his wife. “I feel for my great-grandda for I would be

angry to if I lost the woman I love. I do not know how he lived the many years without her.”

“I imagine they are together now and happy,” Flora said.

“I hope so. I hope they have in death what they did not have in life... time together without fear or turmoil.” He tucked a strand of hair that had fallen across her cheek behind her ear. “We will love every day, wife, and share a good life together, for I will have it no other way.”

He kissed her and she smiled.

“Do not take long to slip inside me, husband, for I have an ache for you,” she said.

“As you say, wife,” he said, teasingly and did exactly as she asked.

* * *

THE ICY COLD WOKE TORIN. It circled his legs and crept up along his body. He shivered as he opened his eyes. A light emanated from the end of the bed, and he sat up. It shimmered and he watched as it began to take shape. A man and a woman, a quite beautiful woman, stood there, the man’s arm wrapped around her.

They smiled and he could have sworn he heard the man say, “I am grateful, great-grandson, and I am proud of the man you have become.”

The woman spoke and he heard her clearly in his head. “You will be blessed with six wonderful children, and they will do the Clan Norham proud.”

They began to fade when his wife was suddenly sitting up beside him.

“Do you see them?” Torin asked, continuing to stare as they slowly faded.

“See what?” Flora asked, narrowing her eyes to look where he did, hoping to see whatever it was he saw.

“My great-grandda and Annora. They are together and happy,” he said with a huge smile.

“Truly? That is wonderful and you see them?” she asked excitedly.

He nodded. “They are gone now, but I saw them clearly.”

“My parents are at peace as well. They came to me in a dream. They know I am safe, and they are happy.”

Torin slipped his arm around his wife and laid back to rest her against him. “I am happy they are at peace as well.”

“We are blessed,” Flora said.

“We are, and Annora says we will be blessed with six wonderful children that will do the clan proud.”

Flora rested her hand on her stomach. “The first one is already inside me.”

Torin’s hand rushed to cover hers. “For certain?”

“Aye, husband, come summer our first bairn will be born.”

“I love you, wife,” he whispered and kissed her brow.

“And I you, husband. We should think of names now so we will be prepared whether it be a lad or lass, we will be ready. I am going to start talking with the women who have bairns and learn all I can about what to expect. I was thinking of making an area in my solar a place where I could keep the bairn while I am there.”

Torin smiled, listening to his wife’s chatter and happy to hear it. He may have wanted a quiet wife, but fate knew better and sent him a woman he could not help but love.

CHAPTER 30



E pilogue, two years later.

“WAH DAT? WAH DAT? WAH DAT, DA?”

Torin smiled at his two-year-old daughter Alina, named after Flora’s mum, holding her comfortably with one arm. She was as curious and as chatty as Flora, and he loved her dearly.

Alina placed her tiny hands on her da’s face and turned his head, then pointed her small finger. “Dat, Da. Wah dat?”

“A tree, Alina,” he said.

“And dat?” she asked, pointing elsewhere.

“A flower,” Torin said.

“And dat?” she asked, pointing up.

“A cloud,” Torin responded patiently

“You need to be more specific, Torin,” Flora said, extending her hand out to him to help her to stand from where she had been kneeling to dig up a batch of nettles.

Torin took her hand and helped ease her to her feet. “Are you all right,” he asked concerned, seeing her rub at her lower back.

“I am good, a backache from bending over,” she assured him.

He rested his hand on her rounded stomach. “Are you sure the bairn gives you no trouble?”

“Aye,” she said, resting her hand over his. “We have two months before he is born and while he is an active one, he causes me little discomfort.”

Torin smiled when he felt the bairn move against his hand. He had often laid his hand on his wife’s stomach when she carried their daughter, amazed to feel her moving and know that their love had created her. It was no different with this second bairn. It still amazed him.

He kissed her cheek.

“Me, Da. Me,” Alina said, turning her cheek to him for a kiss which he did not fail to give her.

“Love kisses,” Alina said with a giggle.

“My kisses, Alina, only my kisses,” he warned, already worried about the time when she reached marriageable age, and he would have to find her a husband.

“We have discussed this, Torin. She will choose her own husband,” Flora said as if she read his thoughts.

“What if she chooses poorly?” he asked.

“We will teach her well and she will choose well,” Flora said with confidence. “Just as I did.”

Torin grinned. “That is because you chose an exceptionally wise man.”

“Aye, and without even knowing it,” she said with a chuckle and scooped up the basket of nettles.

Torin kept an easy pace as his wife walked alongside him through the woods to return home.

“Now, Alina, listen well so you know,” Flora directed her daughter, who turned wide eyes on her mum and remained silent. “That tree—” She pointed to the one Alina had asked her da about. “Is an oak, a mighty sacred tree here in the Highlands that helps us in many ways and which you will learn all about. The violet blue flower you pointed to is a bluebell and, along with the wind flower, are the first to blossom in the spring in the Highlands. If you are lucky

enough to spot a white bluebell, then it is where a fairy has been.”

Alina clapped her hands and twisted her head to look around. “See fairy.”

“Fairies only show themselves to those who they choose,” Flora said.

Torin loved that his wife had come to learn about the Highlands and its myths and beliefs and that she was passing them on to their children along with her own learned knowledge.

Flora pointed up. “The clouds—”

“Pretty,” Alina exclaimed, tossing her head back to stare up at them and Torin quickly tightening his hold on her.

“Aye, they are pretty, Alina, but you must learn that when they change colors, light to dark gray, they warn us of a possible rainstorm or snowfall depending on the season.”

Alina raised her head and clasp her da’s cheeks in her tiny hands. “Snowballs.”

Torin smiled, having taught his daughter how to make and throw snowballs this past winter and having had a wonderful time with her.

Flora carefully plucked a plant from the basket she carried. “This daughter,” she said, waving it at her. “Is a nettle. The young sprouts are the best and make a good brew as well as a delicious soup. It also is a plant that helps heal various discomforts or illnesses, but Iona will teach you about that.”

“Wah dat, Mummy?” Alina asked, pointing.

Torin smiled as his wife continued to explain in detail and with patience everything his daughter pointed to. He even had come to learn things he never knew. One thing he did know, was positive about, was that he had not only a chatty wife but a chatty daughter as well and he loved them beyond belief, and he loved—to his amazement—to hear them chatter.

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