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RACHEL E. MONIZ

LITHA DREAMS

Litha Dreams  
*by Rachel E. Moniz*

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## **Prologue**

Castle Lochaber June 1582

All Aleister Mackenzie saw was a flash of auburn hair as his cousin Morgan ran by him in the stone corridor, laughing and being trailed by her father's terriers. The little dogs pumped their short legs to keep up with the energetic nine year-old girl. Aleister and Morgan has grown up together, both only children, he orphaned at the age of eight and she the willful daughter of his uncle, the Laird of Lochaber and the Mackenzie Clan. He was his uncle's heir and it had been made plain by his Aunt Ellen that he was to be a grown-up young man now and concern himself with learning duties for his future station.

He sighed at the thought of that order. Aunt Ellen spoiled everyone's fun.

Even now he could hear her voice, raised in admonition at Morgan, complaining of her grass-stained dress and urging her to behave. "Behave. Behave. Be enslaved is more what the crone wishes," he muttered to himself. He walked into the dark paneled library that doubled as his uncle's office and found Morgan sitting in a burgundy leather chair, arms folded and mouth pouting.

"What of it, cousin? I heard the old bat yelling," he said.

"The same. As usual. I am not to 'run about as a boy does.' I am to 'remember my place as a young lady.' Why is mother so concerned with appearances? Why can't I act

young and be young while I am young? Grandmother Mackenzie allows me freedom, why not she?" she asked.

"Tis the Lennox blood. Ah, don't worry yourself. Act the way she wants you to when she's around and then be daring and be yourself when she is away," Aleister dismissed in a very male and very matter-of-fact tone.

"All I want is for her to love me as I am instead of trying to change me," Morgan said and then frowned and continued, "She has never liked me as I am."

Aleister felt frustration and anger rising up in him. Ellen was a difficult woman and he was upset that his cousin whom he had protected since she had been born was feeling less-than good enough. "Come on, now. We all love you. You have a great spark and fire in you. Don't let your mother break your spirit. Promise me you will be true to yourself, now. Go right on being you. And if she dares to try and change things, I will protect you."

Morgan smiled and solemnly promised, "I shall be myself. But I do wish I was a boy."

Aleister laughed. "I think in time you will find you like being a girl, cousin."

Morgan shrugged and agreed half-heartedly. "Maybe I will."

Aleister walked to the doorway, saw that no one was about and then smiled at his cousin. "Fancy a wild ride around the castle?"

Morgan's blue eyes opened wide and she said, "Of course! Rules be damned!"



Aleister nodded his approval. "There's a lass!" he said and the two cousins rode off and made merry hell throughout the sunny Scottish highland afternoon.

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## Chapter One

Castle Lochaber Sunday June 17, 1592

Morgan Mackenzie of Lochaber sat sullenly as the man's voice droned on in an incessant hum. *"Who cares?"* her mind screamed as he told her mother about his lands and holdings near the Orkney Islands. This man was as dull as a rock and as dumb as one, too. His teeth were too bucky, his eyes too bulgy, his knees too bony. The thought of touching him made her shudder. But, of course, her mother was smiling and nodding raptly at all Lord "Soandso" was saying. No doubt his money and position made him most attractive in her eyes. Yet another 'suitable suitor' come to call.

Morgan tried to conceal a bored yawn behind her hand and immediately felt a hard pinch on her thigh. She looked at her mother, who looked back at her with a warning glance. *"When will she learn?"* Morgan said to herself, barely hearing the conversation around her.

Finally, after what seemed an eon, he was getting up to leave. He took both Morgan's and her mother's hands in his and dropped chaste air kisses above their wrists. He smiled in what he thought must be a most youthful and flattering way. Her mother simpered and fluttered her eyelashes. Morgan only noticed the bald patch on top of his head.

Once he was safely outside, Morgan rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "What a bore!" she said out loud.

Lady Ellen looked sharply at her daughter and was taken aback by her attitude. "I cannot believe you would not consider Lord MacPhee. He has lands and homes throughout Scotland! Some of his manors are bigger and better than Castle Lochaber! What more do you want, Morgan? Your father has been very kind to give you time to make a decision on whom to marry, but he will not let the year end without you being safely wed! Make your choice or he will choose for you."

Morgan sighed. "The men you choose are all self-centered. And old! And just dull. Mother, I want to be swept off of my feet and the men who have come to call don't even know what a broom is!" She hoped her small play on words would lighten her mother's mood. Unfortunately, it didn't.

"You and your excitement! Let me tell you, none of that lasts, so why bother looking for it? You need security with a man who can care for you. You need to grow up!" her mother hurled at her.

Morgan shook her head. It was always the same. Her mother would never understand her. They were not cut from the same cloth. Morgan of Lochaber was beautiful and passionate. This fight with her mother had been raging since she was a child. Ellen commanded and Morgan rebelled, just as night followed day. She tried to live her life to the fullest and knew that at times she caused her parents worry, but it was who she was.

Lady Ellen shook her head back when she noticed her daughter doing the same. Morgan began to ascend the stairs when Ellen called out, "Your father and I are losing patience

with you." Her mother's words followed her up into the corridor where her chambers were.

When she entered her sitting room, Ruadh, her maid, came to greet her holding an armful of towels and asked, "How was your meeting?"

Morgan raised a cocky eyebrow. "He was bald, bucktoothed, bulgy-eyed and bony-kneed. A real marriage prize!" Her voice dripped sarcasm.

Ruadh laughed, "Where are they finding these men?"

"The fiery pits of Hades as far as I can tell! Oh, Mother and her eternal notions of what a woman needs! Security, homes, stability. She is deliberately seeking out the most unattractive men because she thinks this will curb my will. That may be fine for her, but not me. You are so lucky that you get to choose on your own, Ru," she said as she flung herself onto her high bed.

The two girls were both redheads, Morgan's hair a deep, rich auburn and Ruadh's a true carrot top shade. They were close, more than a lady and her maid should be according to Lady Ellen. Ruadh had gypsy blood in her and still favored that wild and free life though she had been a maid in Castle Lochaber since she was eleven. This fun side of her appealed to the willful Morgan in a most exciting way.

"Yes, I do get to choose. And your dear cousin is the man I choose! We always have great fun planned! Especially this week. It's the Summer Solstice, midsummer's night, on Thursday. And the Full Moon. There will be magic that night!" she said as she neatly stacked towels on the shelf.

Morgan looked at Ruadh with some envy. "I want to have fun, too, before I am married off and become too old to care about fun anymore" she said quietly.

Ruadh stopped and looked at Morgan. "My aunt has invited me to go to the gypsy camp. Come with me. She will tell our fortunes, Morgan!"

Morgan thought about accompanying Ruadh. It did sound like fun and an adventure. "I'll go," she said decisively, "and maybe I will meet the real man of my dreams!"

\* \* \* \*

Morgan had spoken the words "man of her dreams" deliberately. For the last few months she had been dreaming about a man, one she was sure she had never met before. All of the villages on Lochaber lands were small and almost everyone knew each other or of each other.

This man was tall with dark hair and deep hazel brown eyes. He had a very square jaw and a small cleft in his chin. He was powerfully built and in her dreams his strong arms lifted her up and held her close. Morgan may have been a lady of her day, but thanks to the liberal education that she had gotten from Ruadh and her numerous Mackenzie cousins she knew what sex was and in her dreams they had made love often. She frequently awoke longing for her dream lover to be real. Of course, Ruadh had been entranced hearing about her dreams and being of a mystical nature, firmly believed that they were a portent of Morgan's future.

She knew that sitting and waiting in her family's castle would not bring this dream man to her even if he did exist. If

he was there to find, better it be before her parents lost patience and betrothed her to a man she did not love. Maybe the fortune teller could tell her where to start.

Ruadh helped her dress for dinner and they both went down to Castle Lochaber's dining hall. Although it was June, the stone corridors of the castle were chilly and dim even with the advanced daylight of this time of year. Torches still blazed on the walls every few feet. The din from the hall was growing louder as they got closer. Morgan had many male cousins and they always made any gathering exciting. Her cousins, some well into their third or fourth cups of mead and ale, called to her as she strode by.

"There's our girl!" Angus yelled and a drunken cheer went up from his table. She smiled at the exuberant greeting from her kinsmen. "A hard-hearted one, she is! A true Lady of Lochaber! Takes after our grandmother, she does," he said slurring his words as he sputtered on. She once again admired their openness and free ways. Ruadh went to the table nearest the family and Morgan continued to her seat near her parents.

Laird Robert looked at his daughter and grinned with pride. To think that she sprang from his loins. Aye, she had a wildness to her, but a good daughter just the same. Nothing like his shrew of a wife. He looked at Ellen, sitting with pursed lips at the men's coarseness, and marveled that a prude and nag such as she could have birthed such a vibrant creature.

"Good evening, daughter," he murmured as she dropped a kiss onto his head. "Your mother has told me all about your meeting with MacPhee."

"Yes, Father," she said with false sweetness. "He was most memorable. He certainly made an impression."

"Good!" Robert said, not noticing his child's sarcasm. "I am sure you will make your choice soon. After all, a lass of nineteen is ready for marriage!" He gulped mead from his goblet and said in a whisper, "And it will get the old lady off of my back!"

Morgan nearly choked as she took a drink from her own goblet. So, her mother's threats of her father losing patience were hollow ones! Hmph. This was useful information. Her mother would not hurry her into a marriage with the threat of her father's anger.

She ate the venison and beef stew that were served that night in a state of thoughtful quietness. She saw Ruadh laughing and flirting with Aleister. She saw the other maids and serving girls being free to be near any man they wanted. And there she was, spoiled, able to get anything she wanted materially and still be so miserable from the pressures her mother placed on her.

Ruadh saw her friend looking at her and winked and smiled. Morgan perked up a bit. She at least had a good partner-in-crime. Now she just needed to decide to commit one. She waved at Ruadh and Aleister, cocking her head to the side with a look that told her close friend that they could indeed look forward to adventures this week,

Ruadh turned to Aleister and said, "Your dear cousin has been run ragged with the suitors Lady Ellen has had visiting. I offered to take her with me when I visit my Aunt Sionnach

this week and judging by that determined look she just sent our way, I think she has just agreed to go!"

Aleister took a long swallow of his ale and answered her. "Good. She needs to get out of this castle. My aunt has been tightening the reins on her far too much this last year. I have never liked when that high-flown woman tried to mold Morgan."

"She disapproves of our closeness. I am surprised that I have not been sent to serve with the laundresses rather than be Morgan's maid." Ruadh said in a whisper.

"If she only knew about us," Aleister said.

"Scandal! Fire! Brimstone! For certain, it would be a shock to her sensibilities. But you and your cousin seem to like being outrageous." Ruadh laughed.

Aleister smirked and said, "Let's meet after midnight and see how outrageous we can be."

"Oh yes, my lord," Ruadh said, gifting him with a seductive wink and raising her glass to a night of possibilities.

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## **Chapter Two**

Castle Culloch Morning Monday June 18, 1592

"Laird Rowan Buchanan of Culloch," he said aloud to himself. "Such a grand title for a man, ye old dog." He opened his eyes. It was almost dawn. He peered at the threshold where Eliphas, his wolf, was laying. The big beast had barely raised its head when he settled back down deciding that it was too early to be up. He looked at Rowan with tired amber eyes and then slowly closed them.

Rowan stayed absolutely still under his covers. The pale pink streaks across the sky told him it was time to start his day, but he was loathe to remove himself from the bed. He was feeling rather introspective this morning.

"Thirty-two and unmarried!" cried his mind over and over. The talking-to he had gotten from his Uncle James rang in his ears. He was feeling a measure of guilt at not finding a wife, but there was also dismay thrown into the mix. Most of the lasses he met were all opportunists and money grubbers. How in hell was he going to find a worthy girl in 1592?

Finally, Rowan quit the bed, naked as the day he was born, and went over to the window. His hazel eyes took in the lands around Culloch Castle and if he leaned out, he could see the whole of the clan holdings. Aye, the ancient Buchanans had built this stronghold and he was the heir of it all.

Rowan went over to his dressing table and splashed cold water over his face and then stared hard at the man in the

reflection of the mirror over his washbowl. Strong jaw and brow lines, a stubborn cleft chin and intense gaze looked back at him. Dark hair, with two or three silver strands creeping into the mix, completed the Celtic look of him. "Ye're a handsome devil," he laughed to himself, "Now where is yer other half?"

He thought he might know. In truth, Rowan, a romantic at heart and believer in fate, had been haunted by the lady in his dreams as of late. A beautiful redhead with the clearest crystal eyes. He racked his brain over and over trying to recall where he might have seen her before. He wondered if she was some former lover he had had in his youth, though he doubted that he would be able to forget the red hair and blue eyes. Especially the way those same eyes looked at him when they made love in his dreams. No, she was definitely a woman he had never met.

Rowan dressed slowly, all the while being watched by Eliphas. He was Rowan's constant companion, found two years ago when Rowan had been hunting. The little creature had been orphaned and the only one of his litter alive. He had been no bigger than Rowan's hand. He had tenderly fed and raised the wolf pup and they had bonded like no other pet he had had. Now, when Eliphas stood on his hind legs he was taller than Rowan yet was gentle as a lamb with him.

When Rowan was dressed and ready to go down to the hall of Culloch Castle, Eliphas stretched and fell into step beside him. The hall bustled with activity and servants placing dishes of food on the wooden tables. Most of the men of the Castle

were breaking their fasts and as Rowan sat to pile eggs and sausage onto his plate, he joined in the conversation.

"...and ye know what happens on Solstice night? Only Beltaine rivals the orgy we can look forward to this week," boomed Donald.

"Oh, aye! The bonnie lasses will be well into the mood and we can be assured of sport," Ian agreed as he shoved a forkful of greasy bacon into his mouth.

"Will you join us, Rowan?" Donald asked turning to look at his distant kinsman and Laird of his clan.

"Uncle James would be sorely displeased wi' me after the tongue lashing I got about finding a wife. Oh hell! There's no' a wife in sight so might as well enjoy the willing wenches," he said raising his eyebrows in delight.

"There's a lad!" Donald and Ian said in unison. Rowan smiled. The Buchanans were a lusty lot of men's men, arrogant and crude, but there was surprisingly little rivalry amongst them and they were all loyal to one another in the extreme. Culloch had been their lands for a few hundred years and their ancestors had fought beside Wallace and his men. They were Scotsmen to their bones and worshipped at Scotland's altar. Pride of their Highland blood was evident in their cocksure attitudes.

"So what have ye planned for the week, Rowan?" Ian asked, piling his plate high once more with food.

"Making the rounds of the lands, seeing if aught is needed by our farmers and also seeing what gossip the gypsies bring. Tis a pleasant time of year," Rowan declared.

And indeed, it was a time of relative peace around him and he enjoyed his time checking in on his holdings. Mayhap even a visit to Sionnach, his favored gypsy palm reader, would be in order. Despite his current problem of James pressuring him to find a suitable wife, his life was good. He smiled as he went about his business of the day.

\* \* \* \*

Evening Castle Lochaber Monday June 18, 1592

That night, after having spent time that day with her mother and her aunts, Morgan was in her rooms with Ruadh, talking and planning their excursion to her aunt's.

"How can we sneak out?" Morgan asked.

"I thought of that. Your mother is not apt to give you permission to leave. She retires early, though, so maybe after she is asleep we can go without anyone seeing us," Ruadh offered. "Aunt Sionnach will be sure to send my cousins as escort for us when we leave, so if we come back before dawn and the castle is not yet awake, no one will know!"

"It would not be a pretty scene if she caught us," Morgan said. Then she added her favorite phrase of dismissal, "Be damned! I will be daring!"

"Tomorrow night, then? I will send word to Aunt Sionnach," Ruadh smiled.

"Twill be a grand adventure!"

The two girls said goodnight and Morgan lay in bed feeling the excitement at her planned rebellion. She was drifting off to sleep but was already dreaming; at least she thought she

was dreaming. The man before her was tall with incredibly wide shoulders. She could not see the whole of his face, just his eyes but she felt his hands roaming over her body. She tried to speak but her mouth was immediately covered by his and she got lost in the fiery feel of his lips. She reached her hands up past his neck and threaded her fingers in thick dark hair. She was fevered, in need of his body and in her sleep, she cried out.

\* \* \* \*

### Castle Culloch That Same Evening

Across the miles that separated them, Rowan was laying still in his bed. The lady had come to him again in his dream. The same lady with the same crystal eyes and full lips as all of the other times. "Who is she?" he thought. He closed his eyes and thought more of the dream and replayed it in detail.

He was near Culloch lying back with his head on a rock. He had been swimming and was allowing the unusually warm sun to dry his nude body. She had come from his right, clad in a luxurious blue velvet cloak. She spoke no words but stood over him. The sun behind her head created a halo around her and he truly thought he was looking at an angel as she looked down upon him.

As his glance swept from her feet to her head, the wind billowed the cloak open and he saw she was naked beneath it. She threw the cloak off her shoulders and bent low over him, her breasts barely touching his chest, and kissed him softly on his lips. He reached his hands into her hair and pulled her

down totally on top of him. Their lips met and touched dozens of times at the beginning of their slow mating dance. He pulled back from her, and looked deeply into the sweetly soulful eyes. They were magnificently made, round, wide and clear. The rest of her face, except for her full sensual lips, became a blur to him. Long, dark lashes swept down as she blinked. A coy hand reached out to trail long fingers down his chest and then up again.

He could control himself no longer. He rolled his body over hers, pinning her to the green grass beneath her. His hands touched every intimate part of her, the roundness of her breasts, their smooth undersides, down to her soft thighs and then into her moist flesh. She was ready for him and he waited no longer to cover her body with his. Their lips came together in a deep kiss and he buried himself inside of her.

Her tiny cries with each of his thrusts made him mad with the need to brand her as his own. Their kiss was broken, her hands remained on each of his cheeks, holding his face steady as he looked down, deep into her eyes and saw himself reflected in their blueness.

The friction from his body worked its magic, she moaned low in her throat as she felt her orgasm start and it was then that he, too, peaked. The dream began to fade until all Rowan was left seeing were her eyes, which seemed to say, "I am here and I belong to you ... why haven't you found me?"

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## **Chapter Three**

Castle Lochaber Tuesday June 19, 1592

Morgan awoke from a fitful sleep that Tuesday after spending the night alternately being excited about sneaking out with Ruadh and being terrified her parents would find out. It was not so much her father she feared, but her mother's ideas about propriety and what ladies should and should not do were very rigid. Especially now with her mother sorting through the marriage prospects, she was sure she would catch hell for causing anything to besmirch her reputation. Mingling with gypsy riffraff just wasn't done.

The day went much like all of the others. Lady Ellen was making her way through all of the castle chambers, redecorating and cleaning as necessary and had enlisted both Ruadh and Morgan to help her. They had plenished the last of the men's guest quarters and were pleased to finally end their work day. Lady Ellen declined going to the dining hall, instead telling Ruadh to send for Keeley, her maid, so that she could retire early. Morgan's heart did a little happy turn.

She and Ruadh sat together in the dining hall, without Lady Ellen's censorious presence, and went over their plans for the evening.

Ruadh had trusted Aleister enough to have him arrange for their horses to be saddled and for there to be no stable workers in the area so they could leave unnoticed. After wolfing down the soup and coarse bread that was served that

evening, they went to their chambers to get dressed and wait with excited impatience.

\* \* \* \*

Rowan sat soaking his day away in the round wooden bathing tub. The water felt good on his aching shoulders. He hurt but he felt accomplished at the same time. He took great pride in the fact that he was able to help one of his tenants re-thatch his house and then went to help birth a calf that had been overdue. He had gotten his hands dirty with his own land and loved it.

He had decided that tonight was the night to meet with Sionnach and have his fortune told and perhaps hear what stories the gypsies had from their travels. Rowan's grandmother had entertained him with stories of the gypsies when he was a child and most of his friends as a boy had been gypsy boys and he was most comfortable when he was with them.

He got up from the tub, dried off and dressed quickly in black breeches and tan linen shirt. He added a short sword, called to Eliphas and the two set off for their dinner and then, later that evening, the gypsy camp.

\* \* \* \*

### Castle Lochaber Later that Evening

Morgan and Ruadh hurried down the stairs to the main galley and then out into the bailey. Just as promised, none of the usual men were about and there were the horses ready to



take them the four miles to the camp. Morgan nuzzled Belle, her white mare, and then climbed into the saddle. The two redheads slowly set off.

"I cannot wait to see what your aunt has to say about me when she reads the cards," said Morgan. "I am going to ask her about the dream I have been having."

"I am sure she is going to tell you the same things that I have said these past few months. After all, my aunt has taught me all I know about supernatural happenings. You have been having a most telling prophetic dream!"

Morgan stayed silent, but was thrilled with the thought that it could all be true.

They rode on toward some lights and as they got closer, could make out the small fires and caravans near them. There were about thirteen Romany caravans there, all colorful and curtained with lush fabrics. The caravans were more than just a place to sleep, the gypsies made their livings in them, as well.

The girls dismounted and led their horses to a hitching post. There were several men sitting around a fire and Morgan was aware of their dark eyes leering at her and Ruadh.

They walked over to a green and black painted caravan and Ruadh called out "Auntie Sionnach?" A beautiful, plump woman dramatically swept back the dark red curtains at the entrance to her home and her dark wavy hair billowed wildly around her as she swept her niece into a hug.

"Ruadh!! Your mother named you correctly. Your hair gets redder and redder each time I see you!" Sionnach and

Ruadh's mother, Roisin, had been sisters and when Roisin had died when Ruadh was a toddler, she had taken in her niece. She had sent the little girl out into service when she was eleven so that she could have more opportunities for herself. Sionnach had no children and loved Ruadh as her own.

Sionnach stood back and looked at Morgan. "Lady Morgan Mackenzie. I welcome you to my home."

Morgan smiled. "I have heard so much about you. I am pleased to finally meet you."

"So girls, tell me ... what questions do you have for me? Men? Love? Marriage?" Sionnach guffawed. "Tis all young women want to know these days!"

"Well, Auntie, we are not here for me today, I believe I have found the one that I was meant for in Aleister. But Morgan has questions tonight."

"Of course, my dears, And once we catch up on all that has been happening, I will read the cards for you," Sionnach said, stirring a potent mixture in a large cauldron.

Morgan looked past her and saw the black fabric covered table laid out with candles and a large rose quartz. Beside the candles was the deck of Tarot cards that would, hopefully, tell Morgan about the dream man. She felt a shiver of excitement.

The three women sat and talked companionably for over two hours and had some of the delicious stew Sionnach had made. Ruadh was telling her aunt about her duties at Lochaber Castle and Morgan talked about the pressures her mother put on her about marriage. At this, Sionnach called her to the table. Handing the cards to Morgan, she instructed

her to shuffle and think of a question. Morgan silently asked, "Who is the mystery man and will we meet?" and then handed the shuffled deck back to Sionnach.

The dark-haired woman laid the cards out on the table and had a small smile playing about her lips. "Well, my dear, your time of great power is approaching!" Morgan stared at the cards and then Sionnach began to explain.

"The first card represents you, love. The High Priestess. Feminine wisdom, spiritually enlightened, intelligent, strong. You are determined to make the best decisions for yourself." She pointed to the next card. "This next card, The Lovers, is your covering card and shows your concerns at the moment. You want shared values and common goals with a man, the full experience of a relationship, mystical union. The card also shows the Tree of Life and the Tree of Wisdom."

Morgan listened quietly taking it all in. Sionnach continued. "The crossing card is the Nine of Cups. Arrogance, illusion, everything for show. You are searching for more than mere surface qualities. You are looking for depth, not a showy man. This fourth card, the Queen of Pentacles, is the atmosphere around you and clearly shows what you spoke about regarding your mother. She is concerned with security. Try not to be too hard on her, Morgan. What she does comes from a place of caring." Morgan nodded.

"The next card is the base of the matter. The Four of Cups shows not making a decision and holding out until the right choice is before you." Sionnach smiled once more. "Smart girl! The Knight of Swords, which is showing the previous six months, is a card showing rebellion and fighting off the

influence of other people in order to have your own will. It could also represent a male family member and his influence."

Morgan and Ruadh laughed and said in unison, "Aleister!" and then turned their attention back to the cards.

Sionnach paused and then pointed to the next card with the tip of her red-painted fingernail. "And this is where your life shall become interesting, my love. Soon you will meet the King of Pentacles. A strong man that makes things happen." She winked at Morgan, "And he has a castle, too!" The women all laughed.

"Ahh, the Empress. A woman of great personal power, fertility and wisdom. This my, dear, is how you have always tried to show yourself. But, as I look to see the card you chose for how others see you, The Fool, it is plain that they feel that you are still young and need protecting." Sionnach gestured to the last two cards. "Now, my dear, let me say that your fears, as represented by the Five of Cups, are that you will make the wrong decision and marry a man not of your worth. Let me assure you that the Two of Cups, the Final Outcome, shows a relationship of understanding and mutual giving." She shrugged her shoulders, "You are to be ecstatically happy, love!"

Morgan was pleased at the reading, but needed to ask nonetheless. "I asked about the man I have been dreaming of when I shuffled the cards. I wanted to know if we would meet. Do you think that we will?"

Sionnach looked thoughtfully at her. "Oh, yes, yes!!! Dreams are messages from the universe. Your reading shows

you will meet. And it will be soon," she said with finality and began to gather the cards. It was well past midnight and time for the two young lasses to be going back to Castle Lochaber.

The women embraced as Ruadh's two cousins went to get their horses and promised to meet again. "Come to the Solstice festivities on Thursday. Tis sure to be a magical night with the Full Moon. Be bold and sneak out again," Sionnach invited as she waved the young women off.

As Morgan and Ruadh mounted and left with their escort of the gypsy cousins, neither was aware that another rider looked upon them in disbelief. Rowan and Eliphas had stopped a mere hundred feet from Sionnach's caravan and Rowan now gazed upon the embodiment of the woman he had only seen in his dreams. At first, he thought that he was merely imagining her. After all, she had been on his mind almost constantly this day. The jolting realization of this confirmation that the dream lady was indeed flesh and blood threw him into temporary immobility.

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## **Chapter Four**

Rowan stared at her retreating back for a moment before a stronger urge, an overwhelming male compulsion, overtook him. In his heart, filled with joy at finally finding her, he claimed her as his own. He spurred his mount on and made his way to catch up with the group. At the sound of another rider approaching, all turned to look in Rowan's direction. He was barely ten feet away now.

The light from a nearby fire flickered over the man's face and as Morgan looked into his eyes, eyes that she had known so well for these past months, recognition lit up her own face and those around her heard her sharp intake of breath. He was real!

Their eyes locked and Morgan felt her heart hammering in her chest. She had never expected to meet this way. Never even knew he was available to meet! It was really almost too much for her. It was at that moment, meeting the haunting man, that Morgan of Lochaber lost her nerve for the first time in her life.

She tore her gaze from him and then set her horse to running at a fast clip to get her away from him as quickly as she could. She heard the thundering hoof beats of Ruadh and the two cousins following her and finally slowed down enough to let them catch up.

Ruadh had a worried look on her face. "What happened? Who was that?" she asked. Fionn and Fiach, her twin cousins, were in full protection mode. "He be a bold one, approachin'

us as such and makin' the two of ye afeared," bellowed Fionn. His brother nodded. They were a fierce looking pair, dark gypsies with tempers to match.

Her words came out as a hoarse, disbelieving whisper, "It's fine. Ru, it was him. From my dreams." She closed her eyes as she spoke.

"For real?" she asked. Morgan nodded and Ruadh said excitedly, "Oh, I have never heard of anything like this happening! I believe in magic but this seems like too much."

"My God, I made an ass of myself running like that," Morgan winced as she remembered how fear had filled her soul at the sight of him. "I am almost struck dumb at the absurdity of all this. I cannot make any sense of it."

Ruadh gave a tinkly little laugh, "Tis the magic of the week. It is Solstice night soon. Some may scoff at the power of the ancient holy days but we gypsies believe." Fionn and Fiach nodded.

"As that is the only explanation that makes sense at the moment, I will just have to believe that myself. Let's hurry home. I need a good rest to figure out what I am going to do next." Morgan said, giving one last look over her shoulder to see if the man was behind them. To her dismay, she saw he had turned back in the direction of the gypsy camp and had not followed them. She rode home, determined that this first meeting would not be their last.

\* \* \* \*

Sionnach and Rowan had been sitting and talking about the strange goings on of the night. Sionnach had listened

raptly as he told her about the identical dream that Lady Morgan had come to her with. Throughout their meeting, Sionnach's eyes had widened, her lips gathered in a moue of disbelief. There were some who did not put any faith in destiny or the greater will of the universe, but didn't this turn of events tonight prove that such things were true?

Finally, Rowan had finished with his story and gazed at his friend from childhood asking, "Will you read the cards for me or at least my palm?"

"No need, no need, but if it is what you want, then I shall do so for you, but only three!" She picked up the deck once more and handed them to Rowan. "You know what to do," she said. Rowan

In quick succession he shuffled the cards, then chose three and laid them face down before her.

Sionnach slowly lifted the edge of the first card and uncovered the Magician. "The tools are before you, ready to be used in the completion of your destiny," she explained.

The second card was The Wheel of Fortune. Sionnach clicked her tongue at the message from the card. "The wheels of fate are turning. A new cycle in your life."

The last card was the The Lovers. At this, Sionnach threw her hands dramatically in the air and exclaimed, "And there is the crux of it all! Rowan, my old friend, tis plain to see that this meeting was destined! Roll with the will of the universe. Go to Morgan of Lochaber and seal your fates!"

"She ran from me."

"Oh, she is young," Sionnach dismissed with a wave of her expressive hands. "She knows you! She spoke of the same



dream as you. She sat in that very chair telling me about you not a mere two hours hence!"

Rowan had been knocked off balance but was starting to get his wits back. "Ye say she is a Mackenzie? I know Aleister Mackenzie. As a matter of fact, the lad owes me a favor for finding him his new horse and he can oblige me by getting me a meeting with the fair Morgan."

Sionnach smiled, "Fortes fortuna iuvat."

"Fortune does, indeed, favor the bold! When did ye learn Latin?" he laughed.

"I am a woman of many talents. And if I have my way, matchmaking will be one of them. Now go! Get the girl, you daft man!"

He left the camp and planned the next day during his ride home.

\* \* \* \*

Castle Lochaber Morning Wednesday June 20, 1592

Somehow, Morgan had been able to sleep after getting back to Lochaber Castle. She had been a bundle of nerves on the ride home, not just from the meeting, but from the stress of wondering if her sneaking out would be discovered. Her worry was unfounded. Except for the man on duty that night, they were unnoticed by anyone and she and Ruadh made it safely to their quarters.

After awakening well past sunrise, Morgan pondered the next step. She had to see him again. Tomorrow was the Solstice and she had decided to be bold once more and go

back to the gypsy camp. Mayhap he would be there, too? She would need to speak to Ru about that.

Just as she was setting her feet to the floor, Ruadh came whipping into the room, closing the door loudly behind her.

"You will never believe what has happened!" she cried.

"Oh really?" Morgan said with her great sarcasm, "Has another man that I have dreamed about appeared?"

"Not another one, the same one!"

"What?!?" Morgan said.

"Aleister was called on this morning before dawn even broke by a servant of your dream man bearing a note from him! Your cousin knows the man. His name is Rowan Buchanan and he is the Laird of Culloch, just thirteen miles from here. It's amazing! This is all a work of fate, destiny! This was all meant to be." Ruadh was breathless from the wonder of it all.

"What did he want with Aleister? Did he know me?" She panicked again. If the Laird had said where he had seen her, her mother might find out about last night.

"He asked Aleister to introduce the two of you. He said that he knew Aleister's cousin was of a marriageable age and as he is also in the market for a bride, he begged an introduction. The reason I know it is the same man is that he had written to Aleister that he had seen Sionnach last night," Ruadh explained.

"All this time he was so close!" she murmured. Then her mood changed. "In the market for a bride," she said bitterly. "I pray that was only his excuse to meet me and not really true." All of the men who had come to visit and been 'in the

market for a bride' had turned her quite off of the subject of marriage. She wanted to keep her ideal dream man exactly that ... ideal and without faults.

"Well, you'd be a fool to refuse to him if he wants to marry! What a handsome man," Ruadh said, remembering the way Rowan looked last night.

"Well, now what?"

"Aleister told me that he was insistent on meeting you today. He responded with an invitation to come to Lochaber and his page returned a note from Laird Buchanan and he will be here this afternoon."

Morgan was surprisingly at peace knowing that he was coming to her. She might have lost her nerve last night, but she was in her normal, passionate state today. Sneaking out had made her even more bold. She smiled a half smile. What fun.

"Ru, a bath is in order! As you have said, fate it is! And I prepare to face it!"

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## Chapter Five

Morgan was bathed and dressed and she and Ruadh went down into the hall for their morning meal. As she was seated in her usual spot between her parents, she saw Aleister making his way to the family table.

"Uncle, Aunt," he said bowing toward her parents, "Cousin! You look wonderful for your visitor this afternoon."

Morgan had flames coming from her eyes, willing her dark haired cousin to be quiet. He noticed, but it was too late.

"Visitor? What visitor, Morgan?" Lady Ellen demanded.

Her father, bless him, said nothing.

Aleister wisely stayed silent and let Morgan explain. "One of Aleister's friends has asked for an introduction and I have agreed to meet him."

"Who is this person?" Ellen said imperiously.

Aleister then spoke, "My old friend, the Laird of Culloch."

Her father came alive at this bit of news. "The Buchanan lad? Oh, aye! That's an honor for Lochaber! Save his place for the evening meal."

"The Laird of Culloch," her mother repeated. Morgan groaned inwardly at her mother's speculative tone. This was to be awkward enough without her interference.

"I should like to talk to him myself," Lady Ellen said with finality and effectively made Morgan lose her appetite.

Aleister looked guiltily at Morgan. His cousin's blue eyes had turned to ice and he marveled at what an imbecile he could be at times. He sat down to breakfast with his other kin

and decided he would speak to her alone when the morning meal was finished.

Aleister was hesitant to approach his cousin after she had grown angry at the table. He was never quite sure how she would react to his brotherly advice, but he felt he should speak. He had never really been close to his Aunt Ellen and now that he was twenty three and saw how pushy she was with Morgan regarding her husband hunting, he wanted to talk to her about the direction her life was taking. He had, after all, vowed when they were little to keep her as the sunny, passionate person she was.

Lady Ellen had finished eating and in her usual haughty manner, was leaving the hall in a flurry of disdain. All of the Mackenzie men watched as the mistress of their keep went by with nary a look or glance even acknowledging them.

Angus, the most outspoken at the table said, "May God bless Robert for the twenty odd years he's had to share bed and board with that Lennox shrew. I've never seen the likes of that woman's attitude."

"She's trying to turn Morgan into the very image of her, as well," Aleister said. "Bringing these old fools to court her!"

"Awww, we are thankful that she is all Mackenzie and not Lennox! Our cousin is a rare female with spirit and brains. She will not be swayed by her mother," Angus said with confidence.

Aleister gulped down the last of his drink. "Nevertheless," he said, "I am going to talk to her. Once her advisor and mentor, always so." He got up from the table and went over to Morgan who was picking daintily at her bowl of oatmeal.

"Forgive your old cousin for revealing the Laird's visit?" he humbly asked.

Morgan laughed and said, "You know I cannot stay angry with you for long. I just wanted this meeting to be an easy and relaxed one."

"Ruadh mentioned something to me this morning about this common dream between the two of you? And sneaking out to see the gypsies? You are keeping much from me!" he said.

"And with good reason! Look at how you revealed things to mother this morning. See how she took right over, insisting in that highhanded tone that she get to meet him, as well. I am allowed no control, no say," she said sulkily.

"I have always encouraged you to be bold and to think for yourself, my dear cousin. And I am encouraging you again in this instance to explore this circumstance with Laird Buchanan. Ruadh has taught me much of the gypsy's mystical ways and has made me a believer in the unseen powers that exist. Call me a fool if you wish, but I think that there is much more to this than meets the eye," Aleister declared.

"You are the only one of the bunch who tells me to be bold. Are you encouraging me to be wanton?" she teased

"Take your pleasure where you may, Morgan. Make your own decisions. It may not be advice that your mother may give you, but I tell you that if she takes the choice from you and you are betrothed to another man, you will regret not listening to your heart. Some may advise modesty and safety, but you are too much woman to be satisfied with those things," Aleister said.

"What made you tell me these things?" she asked.

"I, too, have chosen my heart's direction over my head's. Who in my position loves a gypsy? I am your father's heir and to marry Ruadh is unheard of, yet, it is what my heart wants and by all the power in me, someday it will happen."

She raised her glass at the table and said, "I love you, Aleister. You have always been more brother to me than cousin. Here is to our happiness, whose sources may be unconventional but we deserve it just the same!"

Aleister raised his glass back to her and felt they were blazing new trails together. Regardless of the mores of their day, he knew it was best that they both follow their hearts.

\* \* \* \*

Rowan made the trip across the rolling hills to Castle Lochaber in a surprisingly short time. As the castle came into view, he took in its width and breadth. Three towers stood imposingly at the South, West and East corners and one of the many lochs of the area abutted it on its North side. He had passed this castle many times in his life, but had paid scant attention to it. What a wonder that Morgan was here, safely inside its walls.

He rode into the bailey and surrendered his mount to the stable boy and was then met by a nervous Aleister in the entrance hall.

"What's amiss?" Rowan asked.

"I had a big mouth and now you are not just meeting Morgan but my aunt as well. Be warned, she is nothing like

my cousin. And Morgan is already quite upset to have that banshee there when you meet."

"No worries, lad," Rowan assured him, "The Buchanan charm will work its magic on even the most cold-hearted one in the family. Lead on."

Aleister gave Rowan a thankful look and said, "You will need all the charm you can muster for Aunt Ellen. She has been hounding poor Morgan to choose a husband for months. I am glad Morgan has waited; she is too special for any of the fools that have come through here. She's a rare find, my cousin, and all of us kinsmen want more than just a 'soft' lad for her. By Christ, she'd run roughshod over a man without a backbone!" "I've backbone of steel, my friend," Rowan said confidently.

Aleister led him through the main floor. Rowan was impressed at the good housekeeping of Castle Lochaber and decided that while Lady Ellen might be difficult, she could not be faulted for being a poor chatelaine. They approached a wooden door and Rowan could hear the soft murmur of female voices from the other side. Aleister knocked once and then swung the door open and they stepped in.

Without fail, Rowan's eyes met Morgan's without even traveling to any of the other people in the room. This time, Morgan did not feel fear. She boldly gazed back, a smile playing about her lips. He shifted his gaze to Aleister when he made the introductions.

"Lady Ellen, may I present Laird Rowan Buchanan. Rowan, my aunt."



Rowan bowed to a nodding Ellen and was pleased to see the older woman's face light up when she looked him over, taking particular notice of his ruby ring.

Aleister continued. "Lady Morgan, I present to you, the Laird of Culloch. Rowan, my cousin."

"I am delighted, my lady," he said with his hazel stare meeting her blue one.

"My lord, I am honored to make your acquaintance." He was entranced by her voice, slightly husky and deep.

"Lord Rowan, my dear nephew has told us little about you. I was most intrigued to know that you are Laird of Culloch at such a young age." Ellen smoothly began her sweet interrogation.

"Yes, my parents passed on eight years ago and my Uncle James has no male heirs. He turned over the responsibilities to me seven years ago when I was twenty-five." Rowan could see the mental arithmetic happening in Ellen's mind as she figured out his age.

"Such duties for a young man. Now you just need an heir of your own," she declared, with a sly turn of her lips and a speculative gleam in her dark eyes. She was oozing the honey of her goal of securing a husband for her daughter.

Morgan kept her face absolutely passive, but inside she seethed at the forwardness of her mother! Rowan met her eyes in amusement and then, coyly and slyly so that Ellen would not see, winked at her. Morgan's mood lifted. A kindred, irreverent soul. And to think, she already knew what this man looked like naked from her dreams.

Ellen continued on in her mission to ferret out as much information as she could. Morgan said very little during all of this. She was actually quite enthralled with the skillful way in which Rowan handled her mother. Morgan was prone to explosive outbursts when Ellen tried her patience. She now took note that his way of dealing with her, telling Ellen what she wanted to hear, was the less stressful way to respond.

Rowan had apparently passed muster because Ellen, pleased with her interview of the young Laird, suddenly rose and bid Aleister help her to check on the evening meal, which would leave Rowan and Morgan alone with each other for the first time. Ellen cruised from the room in her dark gown, reminding Morgan of a frigate in full sail, all pomp and circumstance. Aleister followed behind her, deferentially decorous, until he turned to latch the doors and flashed his mischievous grin at them and gave them a parting wink of approval. As the door closed behind her mother and cousin, Morgan looked at Rowan fully and said, "You are a man of great fortitude to have dealt with her the way you did."

"Like any brave knight, when the prize is as coveted as ye, no foe seems too great to face," Rowan said with a jestful tone. His eyes, however, were reflecting how serious his words were.

"I am a woman of frightening forthrightness, my lord, and I feel no need to disguise my true self from you. My cousin informed me that you said you were in the market for a bride when you asked to be introduced to me. Is this true?"

Rowan grinned, "Yes."

"My mother is being especially annoying to me by telling me I need to find a husband. You cannot fathom the group of men that have come to call on me these past few months. They have quite put me off the subject of marriage."

"Did ye stop to consider that none of them were yer soul's true mate?" Rowan asked.

"I held back for the man that would move me," Morgan said plainly. "I was not willing to settle for my mother's ideal of what my husband should be."

"Do I move ye?"

"You do, my lord." She swallowed hard at the admitting of this truth. She had such great hope in her heart that he felt the same and did not want to be disappointed.

"This is all very strange. The circumstances of our meeting boggle the mind."

"They are most peculiar," she agreed.

"Indeed."

"Do you believe this was our destiny, that our dreams were this compelling force that drew us together? My maid does, even her aunt does. I am beginning to believe it, too," Morgan said.

Rowan closed the distance between them and took her hands in his. "I believe in all things magic, my lady. And let's be truthful. If this wasn't fated, how can we explain it? Best not to think too much about it and enjoy the fact that we are finally together."

Morgan nodded at his words. "I already like you a great deal. I am sorry that I ran from you last night. The shock of our meeting was too much for me and I gave in to my

impulse. Listening to you today, it was strange. It was as if we have known each other forever."

"I feel the same, Morgan. May I call ye Morgan?" He asked.

"I would feel bizarre if you didn't," she answered. She looked into his eyes, then down at his lips and her cheeks colored at the thought of kissing them the way she had in her nightly fantasies.

"I want to kiss ye, too," Rowan said.

Morgan wondered what Ellen would say if she came back into the room and saw them locked in a passionate embrace. She hesitated for a brief moment and then thought "Be damned!" and moved her face forward and touched her lips to his. Her lips parted slightly and she gave herself over to the power of their first kiss. She was feeling deliciously wanton, kissing a man who, despite having been her 'dream lover', was essentially a stranger.

That first kiss was sweet, innocently so, and they pulled apart when a noise was heard in the hallway. Rowan could feel her passion pulsating from her and thought to himself, "At last! A worthy girl!" He knew that that kiss was to be the one and only chaste one they would share.

No sooner had they pulled apart then Ellen was back in the room, announcing that dinner was served and ushering them into the dining hall.

Robert greeted Rowan with a hearty, booming, "Welcome!" and a full tankard of mead. Morgan could see that her father was well into his cups. The meal progressed and more questions were asked of Rowan. As she had become used to

this day, Rowan was handling her family with ease. For the first time in a long time, Morgan was genuinely happy. Rowan was the only man 'in the market for a bride' with whom she had felt any measure of joy. She thought to herself, "It *is* magic!"

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## Chapter Six

"...and that was how I met old Ellen, damn the day!" Robert was saying in a drunken rant. Morgan, while amused, was glad her mother had gone to bed and was not able to hear her father's hurtful statement. Rowan smiled indulgently at the older man's antics. In truth, he had not had such fun in a long time.

"It be gettin' on in the hours. I am goin' to bed. Now you young folks should be callin' it a day as well. Say goodnight to the young man, daughter," Robert ordered as he walked unsteadily up the stairs, hand now clutching a horn of ale.

"Mother drives him to drink," she explained, after her father moved out of earshot up the stairs.

"We all have our vices," Rowan laughed.

"When shall I see you again?" she asked with no hesitation.

"Tomorrow. Will ye be brave enough to come to the Litha celebration with the gypsies?" Rowan dared.

"I shall be there! Ruadh's aunt already asked me. I want to dance and sing!" She was bubbling over with excitement that they could spend the evening together. She knew, deep inside, that she had been right to wait to find this man.

"Ye will, lass. And watch the wild gypsies do what they do best," Rowan added.

Morgan smiled, wondering what it would be like. She had heard the stories of the wild pagan gatherings and was

honest enough to admit to herself that she was excited at seeing the coarse portions of human nature.

"Wait in your room at exactly ten o'clock. I will find out from Aleister which room is yours." When she would have asked why, Rowan placed a finger over her lips. "Sweet, trust me. I am going to make Solstice night memorable for ye." He turned from her and walked from the entrance hall to the main door and out into the bailey.

"Hmph," Morgan thought, "He didn't even kiss me goodnight!" No matter. The thought of the excitement of tomorrow night was breathtaking! She took the stairs two at a time in an act of supreme defiance to all things considered ladylike. She had had a wicked idea and needed Ruadh's help to make it real.

\* \* \* \*

Ruadh had been excited when Morgan told her of the idea she had had, so much so that as soon as Morgan had finished describing the outfit she wanted to wear to the Solstice celebration, Ruadh had immediately set about making the notion real.

They had spent the next few hours measuring the black cloth that would make a saucy pair of black breeches for Morgan, the white cloth that would make a fine tunic and finally, trimming a plain black corset with Ruadh's beautiful, colorful embroidery. It was close to one thirty in the morning when they finished and Morgan modeled the outfit for Ruadh.

She was entranced by the reflection she made in her cheval glass. Ruadh whistled low. "You are a vision in that.

Every man there is going to take notice. How mischievous of you! Are you sure you don't have gypsy blood?" she teased.

"I am thinking that being bold and brazen is the way to be in this life. I am certainly enjoying myself! Did I tell you that Aleister encouraged me to be bold and follow my heart when it came to Rowan?" Morgan asked. She removed the outfit, hiding it in her wardrobe until tomorrow night.

"Aleister only wants your happiness and fears that your mother, whose intentions may be good, will tamp down the very spark that makes you who you are. He has said so to me many times. I agree with him. Make your own choices as to what you do with the Laird. My aunt can tell you that there are more who regret what they didn't do than those who regret what they did do! She should know, they turn to her for so much!" Ruadh said.

"In the past few days I have done more than I could ever dream of doing. It is feeling quite fun to break free!"

They giggled on until they were both fast asleep.

\* \* \* \*

*Thursday June 21, 1592*

When morning came, Morgan was surprised to see her mother at the table so late, eating a leisurely breakfast.

"Hello, Mother," she said.

"Good morning, my dear. How was the rest of your night with Laird Rowan?"

"Very nice. We seem to get along," she said cautiously, noting the pleased expression on her mother's face. She had



never seen her mother express approval at her actions before.

"I heartily approve of him. What a handsome man he is. And dignified and proper, too. My dear, perhaps, I was wrong about the other men who came to court you. It seems that you were right to wait," Lady Ellen conceded. "You know I only have your future in mind, dear. We women must look after ourselves and you seem to be doing well. After all, you agreed to meet him on your own without any interference from your father or myself." Ellen actually appeared contemplative as she spoke.

"Well, Mother, Aleister is to thank for the introduction and he has always known what suits my personality," Morgan said.

"Yes, yes. Perhaps I have not seen this before now," Ellen replied.

Morgan couldn't believe her mother was actually admitting being wrong. And she liked Rowan. Deep down, as annoying as Ellen was, Morgan always knew her heart was in the right place. "Well," Morgan thought, *"this magic stuff is powerful!"* In an impulsive gesture, Morgan planted a kiss on her mother's smooth cheek. The two women smiled at one another. Now having both Aleister's encouragement and her mother's approval, she was quite sure that tonight would be a night of tremendous import to her. The longest day of the year was starting out wonderfully.

\* \* \* \*

Morgan spent the day on pins and needles, waiting for darkness to fall, feeling myriad emotions. She had paced her room, gotten bored, gone for a walk in the lovely gardens outside the castle, got nervous when she thought she would not have time to get ready for Rowan and finally just decided to stay in her room after she bathed. She wasn't going to put on the risqué outfit until the last possible moment. She might get caught wearing it.

Ruadh had come in to tell her she was leaving for Sionnach's and also to wink and say, "See you soon!" It was almost time for Rowan to come. She hastily dressed and then wondered how on earth she was going to get out of the castle looking as she did? She would have to wear a loose dress over the costume.

As she was rummaging in her wardrobe, she heard something hit the glass of her window. She went over and pushed it open. She felt a small stone hit her forehead and looked down as she rubbed her forehead to see Rowan standing on the parapet walkway some fifteen feet below her. He was carrying a torch and a handful of small stones. He had, indeed, found her room and arrived, but not in the way she had anticipated,

"Sorry for hitting ye, Morgan," he whispered. "Stand away from the window, love," he told her.

She did as he told her and heard the sharp clink of metal hitting the stone wall and saw that he had thrown a rope with a hooked end over the frame and it had fastened itself to the windowsill. She waited to see if he would throw anything else

and then went to the window and looked down at him inquisitively.

"Climb down, don't be scared," he said.

"You surely do know how to make an impression!" she called to him.

"I knew ye'd be bold enough to accommodate my wild wish," he answered back.

The Rowan she was looking at in the flickering torchlight had a child-like grin and she caught his excitement during that moment. She grabbed two dresses from her wardrobe, stuffed them into a bag and then went back over to the window.

She threw the sack down to him and he looked up in confusion. "What's this?"

She smiled and said, "I didn't know what to wear."

Rowan laughed at her decidedly female response and said, "The Gypsies would have told ye to wear naught!" and then his voice trailed off as he caught sight of her descending the wall in the most outrageous outfit her had ever seen. He was immediately tempted by the outfit she had chosen. The tall black boots sent him over the edge. She was deliciously outrageous and wildly pagan.

He reached up as she got closer to him and pulled her into his arms. "Ye scandalous lass. If yer mother only knew!" he laughed.

"Do you like it? Ruadh fashioned the pants and corset for me. Gypsies have a talent with a needle," Morgan replied saucily.

"Are ye sure you don't have gypsy blood in ye?" he joked.

"Ruadh asked me the same thing!" she answered and they both laughed.

"What need do ye have for this, then?" he asked pointing to the bag at their feet.

"There are two other outfits in there and my cloak. In case I need to look more like a lady tonight," Morgan said.

Rowan shrugged. "Tis Solstice night ... there is naught that is wrong . Are ye really ready for this?" he asked.

She could feel that magical pull, strong always in their shared dreams, but so powerful now when they were side by side. She met his eyes and nodded. With him she felt ready for anything.

"And so we go." He took the torch from the bracket on the wall of the castle, hoisted the sack and they began to walk to the stables. His horse was waiting just as he had left him and after he had Morgan settled, he pulled himself up into the saddle. She put her arms around him and they set off into the dark night.

The moon was full and there was a soft glow to the land as they rode. Everything around them was magical and she felt a shiver run through her from head to toe.

They rode for over three quarters of an hour until they began to crest a hill behind which was a valley that was glowing with a bright fire. The mad manic sound of drums and bagpipes was all around them and they could hear laughing, screaming and singing from those who were just over the hill.

Finally, they stood, looking down into the valley and saw the enormous Litha fire and several smaller fires. The gypsy caravans were in a circle well away from the flames and

horses were in the middle of this camp. They rode down to the gathering and the darkest gypsy Morgan had ever seen came forward. He was dressed in a blue tartan over a blue shirt and was wearing a torque in the style of the old Celts. Half of his head was shaved, and the area in the front had a beautiful Celtic triskele tattooed there. He came forward when he saw Rowan.

"Slainte," he said.

Rowan nodded and said, "Well met! I am leaving my horse with the others." "Of course," The gypsy's eyes met Morgan's briefly and then slid down to look at her outfit. They met hers again and with what he must have thought was a seductive grin, winked. Morgan, despite feeling a shiver of uneasiness, enjoyed the moment and got into the spirit of the night.

Sionnach rushed over when she spotted them and gathered Morgan in a hug. "I told you, love, I told you that the cards said your life was going to change soon! Have you gotten to know each other better? You make a beautiful pair! Ohhh! Such joy!" she said in her dramatic manner, clapping her hands together in glee.

Ruadh came up behind her aunt, trailing a shocked Aleister. He looked at his wild-hearted cousin, dressed in her heathen clothes and shook his head.

"Say one word about this and I'll have your balls, cousin," she threatened.

"This is my own making, anyway. This is what I encouraged you to do! I've learned ... I've learned! I will say this, though. I won't tell about you being here, if you don't tell Aunt Ellen about me being here," he bargained.

"Done. What happens here, stays here," she said and Ruadh then pulled Aleister into the circle of gypsies that was getting ready to dance around the fire. Both Morgan and Rowan sat and watched them in comfortable silence. Both were feeling incredibly blessed. They talked for a good portion of the night, joining in the dancing a few times, but spending most of their night together creating a bond between them.

They were listening to the last of the drummers and watching as couples moved to more secluded darkness to continue their own private celebrations.

Rowan's arms moved around Morgan. "Do ye know how tempting ye look in that outfit?" he asked huskily. He had fallen in love in his dreams, but what he was feeling in this moment was a potent *mélange* of lust, desire and pride in her.

Morgan loved the way his arms felt and was thrilled to feel his hands rubbing her upper arms. "I wanted to be rebellious."

"Ye are in that sort of mood, then, Morgan the Rebellious?" Rowan whispered. He pulled her soft body into his and with eyes locked and unblinking their lips met in a hot kiss. Gone was any hesitation or shyness. Her lips melted into his. When they pulled away from each other, Morgan said, "Oh, yes ... I am thumbing my nose at all propriety tonight."

"Where have ye been all this time? Hiding about yer castle so close to me. Tell the truth or be damned. Did ye use your dreams to put a spell on me and draw me out of Culloch to find ye?" He teased and leaned over to playfully rub her nose with his.

Morgan laughed. "Perhaps it was you who did the spell casting, my lord."

He sobered and held her hand tight in his and placed it over his heart. "Morgan, if it is too soon to say this, I apologize wi' all my heart and soul. I am in love with ye. Laugh if ye must. I care not that a scant amount of time has passed since we met face to face. I love yer spirit and yer fire and yer brazen ways. Ye are everything I want in a woman," he said earnestly.

"Rowan. Tonight has been incredible. I feel closer to you than anyone else."

"Marry me."

Morgan was rendered speechless for a full minute. A mere four days ago she had run kicking and screaming from any thought of marriage with any of the men that she had met. Now here she was, ready to say yes to this man. What made him different?

The answer came to her in a blinding flash. They were fated to be together.

"Yes," she answered more sure of this than anything in her life.

"Ye mean it?" he asked, breathless at the thought of her being his

"Yes," she repeated, thrilled to her core that she had done what so few women of her time and station could do: choose a worthy man. Her saying yes to Rowan was not about Ellen and her ideas of security or about any other thing that might be in the interest of her clan or kinsfolk. It was not about being rebellious. This was about Rowan and the magical way

they found each other. This was about how Aleister had encouraged her to follow her heart. It was about Ruadh telling her to have no regrets.

"I am taking ye to Castle Culloch," he said pulling her to her feet and they ran to get his horse from the caravan circle. Sionnach watched with amused interest from her caravan steps and marveled at the speed with which Laird Rowan and Lady Morgan left the bonfire.

Ruadh also saw her friend leave and she and Aleister came over to her aunt. "Where are they off to? We did not even get a chance to share our news"

"They have gone to seal their fate," she said simply. And then with an eccentric gleam in her eye added, "Never doubt the cards! Now, what news have you?"

Ruadh was breathless as she explained to her aunt. "Aleister has Laird Robert's permission to marry me. They spoke at length and Laird Robert has agreed!"

Sionnach whooped with joy and gathered a blushing Aleister and Ruadh into her arms. "Oh, happy night!!!"

"It is most unusual, but one thing I know about the Mackenzie family is their love for shocking news!" Ruadh said.

Aleister nodded after he untangled himself from Sionnach's grasp. "I think there will be two weddings to plan. Aunt Ellen will not know where to start first."

Ruadh laughed. "I can't wait to see her face when she finds out."

And had Morgan been there to celebrate with her dearest cousin and closest friend, she would have said the same



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thing, but she was actively riding out to grasp her own destiny.

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## **Chapter Seven**

Castle Culloch Evening Thursday June 21, 1592

Morgan knew the same passionate desire that Rowan felt and thought the ride to Castle Culloch would never end. Her breasts rubbed against his back as the horse swiftly ran across moonlit hills. She breathed in his scent of musky patchouli and she shivered when she thought of waking up with his scent covering her. This was to be a most welcome and passionate consummation.

Their steed thundered into the bailey of the castle and Rowan swung down from the saddle and then turned to lift her down. She stood enclosed in his embrace with the intense look of his hazel eyes meeting her own. His hands traveled down the small of her back and rested on her hips.

"Morgan," he whispered as his lips brushed hers. There was a moment of tunnel vision where the only people in the world were the two of them. She felt a tingle of excitement as his tongue slipped between her lips and she imagined, brazenly and wantonly, what it would feel like on other parts of her body.

She blushed at her thoughts and Rowan saw the pink of her cheeks. He hurried them inside and up the stone stairway to his chamber. Eliphas, the ever loyal and vigilant watchman, was stretched out in front of the threshold when they arrived. He whined when he saw Morgan and she momentarily faltered

when she looked at the large wolf, which had come closer to sniff at her feet.

Rowan said softly, "He will not harm ye. Tonight ye stay out here, my friend." And even as he padded behind them, Rowan held a stern hand out to him and he immediately lay down with a loud sigh.

With a small click, the door latched behind them and they were now in a world of their own creation. She barely had time to take in the masculine decorations of his quarters, but she could clearly see the wide, high bed that they were going to share.

Rowan came up behind her, nuzzling her neck and moving her long, almost burgundy hair to the side. All the while his hands were busy unlacing the tight corset. Morgan was catching his fever and realized that tonight he was to make her into a woman, *his* woman. She shivered at the thought of him, his strong body meshing with her soft one. She willfully pushed away the cautionary thoughts that were creeping into her mind and the disapproving image of Ellen, who most certainly would be scandalized at what her daughter was about to do. She felt wanton as she thrust aside every rule that had been given to her on how a 'lady' conducts herself, yet she trusted Rowan. Somehow the scant amount of time that they had known each other in true reality mattered little right now.

The glow from the full moon and the scented night air, fragrant with the sweetness of honeysuckle, added to the mystical mood. Beyond the castle, the fires still glowed from

the earlier celebrations. They were both fully alive in this moment.

Morgan turned in his arms and the corset fell away. She was instantly pulled against him and his lips found hers once more. She melted into his arms, eyes closed and heart hammering in her chest.

"I marked ye as mine tonight, Morgan. There can be no other for me. Give yerself to me," he demanded.

"By God," she whispered huskily, "be a man and take me."

Before she could fathom what was happening, he swept her up in his arms and carried her the dozen steps to the bed. He made her stand as his hands lifted the tunic from her body. Her breasts were totally exposed and all she now wore were the skintight breeches and boots.

His hands ran over her nipples and they grew hard under his caress. She could feel her arousal increase and was increasingly aware of the pulsations in her woman's core. While her breathing was shallow, his was deep.

Rowan willed himself to have patience. She was looking down at him with a mixture of wonder and desire. Her pupils had dilated and that gave her gaze a much deeper intensity. She was utterly beautiful. And all his.

He grasped the waistband of the breeches and slowly pulled them down. He needed to inhale her musky scent and then plunge his tongue into her, to taste all of her.

"Lay down, love," he said softly and she did as he asked. He pulled off the black boots and the breeches along with them. She lay back against the green cover, her red hair fanned out all around her. She was totally uninhibited with

him and let him have his fill of her naked body, even opening her legs for him to see her hot pinkness and invite him to touch her. She wanted him naked. She wanted him over her and in her.

Rowan took in the sight of her, spread out before him and thanked the universe that he had found her. His need to be naked with her was overwhelming and before he could go on, he stood up, unbuckling the belt that held his sword and dirk and stripped himself of his clothing. Finally, he was naked and she looked at him, taking in his wide shoulders and sculpted chest. Her eyes traveling to his hard arousal.

"I want you so much, Rowan," she said in her horse, breathy voice.

He came down onto the bed on his knees and she reached out to touch his chest. He lowered his whole body to her side and reached out to pull her to him. Their eyes met for a long, heart-stopping moment in which both of them forgot to breathe. In that one moment, time was standing still and there was an undeniable force surrounding them, binding them together.

They both moved in toward each other at the same time so that neither was sure who was kissing whom. The kiss was searing, hot with passion and longing, slow with it's promise of many tomorrows. Her lips parted and his tongue came out to lick her top lip. She moaned low and moved her whole body closer to his until her thighs were against him.

His arms were strong around her, pressing her breasts against his chest. Rowan broke the kiss and then began to trail hot steamy kisses around her neck, murmuring her name

as he passed near her ear. She was resting her chin on his shoulders, loving the feelings she experienced. His mouth moved lower and he cupped her breast and took her nipple into his mouth and licked and sucked it until she was writhing and moaning on the bed.

He pressed a hand against her shoulder, turning her so that she could lie on her back. Rowan's mouth moved deliberately lower, skimming over her navel until it came to rest just above her pubic bone. She looked down at him and was burning hot and dripping wet at the same time. She only knew she wanted him inside of her, any part of him deep inside of her.

She opened her legs further and silently invited him to taste her. He spread her open, inhaling her scent, and with a ragged breath, lowered his mouth to her. She cried out at the first feel of his smooth tongue and delighted in each stroke after it. He licked her for long moments, thrusting his eager tongue into her.

Morgan rode the sweet sensation of his mouth on her and entwined her fingers in his thick dark hair. She was enraptured, watching his pink tongue caress her own pink flesh. Her hips moved faster, arching herself deeper into his mouth. Until finally she could hold back no more and felt her body release its pleasure as he swam in the ocean of her scent and wetness.

"Rowan," she whispered.

His mouth came up off of her and he brought his whole body up over her. He lowered his mouth to hers and slowly rubbed the tip of his cock where his lips had just been and

totally lost himself to her. He thrust down and was scalded by her wet heat.

Morgan's eyes were closed against the momentary pain and then she found she loved the feeling of wholeness, of being one soul. He began to move with long strokes, fearful that the passion he felt would overcome his resolve to make this first mating last.

Rowan knew he needn't have worried when he felt her second orgasm begin, the fluttery pulsations of her female flesh engulfing his cock. He could hold back no more and he exploded into her, crying her name with each tremor and filling her with his essence, giving her his heart, soul and life.

They laid there, still and quiet, for several minutes. Rowan looked down at her and said, "I love ye, Morgan of Lochaber"

Tears slid out of the corners of her eyes. "Was this naught but a dream?"

Rowan laughed softly. "I can assure ye, lass, this was quite real."

"I love you, too, Rowan. My dream man." They embraced in the bright light of the moon shining in at them.

Morgan looked at Rowan and said, "You know now that you *must* marry me."

"Aye. As if we would leave this room without that being settled. I am not giving you up for anything."

"My mother will be very happy," she said, laying her head upon his shoulder.

"Twill be like a dream come true for her," he punned.

And they both laughed until a drowsy silence surrounded them. Just as Rowan was drifting to sleep in Morgan's arms,

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he heard her voice saying, "What a glorious midsummer night's dream."

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