

Not for Ourselves

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A Karmic Romance

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Chapter One

Alyssa struck the match. Instantly, the end burst into flame. She held it to the wick of the white candle until it ignited. Pinching off the flame, she placed the match on the table. Taking a deep breath, she flipped her long chestnut color braid back over her shoulder; it bounced and swung around her waist. Focusing on her intent, she started the ritual. "Goddesses--Maiden, Mother, Crone I call to thee and ask that you appear to me."

Picking up the candle, she held it above the surface of the water. Its glow illuminated just beyond the rim of the black bowl and reflected off the clear surface. "On this darkest of night, grant me the portal to make things right. Let me see clearly the moments of the past, so that I may understand what is happening at last."

Tapping the edge with the candlestick, the glass on glass echoed throughout the dark room. The vibration rippled through the water. "As I created a wave in the glass, so I ask you to help me with my task."

She set the candlestick next to the bowl and placed her hands on either side palms down. "Let me see where his hatred of me had begun so that his vengeance can be undone. Why he stalks me I know not why, yet I know the answer lies in times gone by. Take me back to the time and place, so that I may end the conflict with haste and grace."

Picking up the four raven feathers, she held them above the candle. "Goddesses of the raven and night, who left these feathers as a symbol of your might. I call you now to come to me, to create a justice that even the blind may see. I call you forth to this land to guide the karmic hand. For those who have done harm to me, let their reckoning begin now--so mote it be."

Placing the feathers equal distance around the bowl, Alyssa paused for a moment to let their energy settle around her. Tilting her neck side to side she felt her vertebrae click into place and her muscles relax. She took a deep breath and allowed her Priestess training to move her into a meditative state. The outer world fell away as she sank deeper within herself and started climbing the stairs to her own soul. Into the darkness, the staircase spiraled upward, until she reached the iridescent platform where her Akashic record was held.

Suspended in the darkness of endless time, Alyssa looked for a guide to help her. But she was alone. In the past, there had always been someone to help her face the challenge. Uncertain, she stepped up to the pedestal. If she was to atone for a past error, she would be given direction. However, if she was merely a player as another strutted and fretted through a karmic lesson, then she could do little more than watch.

The book lay open before her. On it, fate continued to write. “Book of all my lives, show me karmic tie that echoes into this life.” The pages flipped, stopping twice before it came to rest on the life named Shannon Marie Cullen.

The image of an auburn-haired young woman lifted up off the page and hovered above. Her heart-shaped face still had the softness of youth. Yet the hazel eyes sparkled with old wisdom. She wore her hair pulled back into a long, single braid. Although she seemed familiar, Alyssa felt no emotional connection to her. There was no bond or sense of being between them. Only a faint familiarity like a tune whose melody echoes in the back of your mind, yet you cannot remember the words or the context in which you heard it.

She reached out to touch the image; it reached back. Yet before their fingertips touched, Shannon Marie vanished only to be replaced by a three-dimensional screening of a wooded forest. Rich and lush it sported multiple shades of greens, tans, and browns as the forest became fields and forest once again.

As her perspective changed, Alyssa felt herself zooming in to focus on the scene that was the most important. Yet it was more than just pictures and sounds. The smell of the fields and rushing of the river below sparked memories and long sleeping emotions.

No matter where her life led her, she could never find a safe sense of home. Fear always kept her from letting her roots grow too deep. She had never understood. Her childhood was no better or worse than anyone else's. Yet as her spirit drew closer, the familiarity once again made her crave the comfort of home.

Through breaks in the leaves, she saw two girls running quickly. Like a film, she watched them from above. Instead of recalling her own memories, the information flowed to her in unspoken words and images as if someone was narrating their story to catch her up.

Shannon Marie ran breathlessly up the glen, quickly followed by her younger sister, Rachael. Although a year and two months younger, Rachael looked more like Shannon Marie's twin.

Both girls favored their Scottish heritage with their flaming hair and outspoken temperaments. Their two older sisters, Elizabeth Marie and Katherine Anne favored their mother's French heritage both physically and in temperament. Fair-haired beauties they openly used their feminine assets to manipulate others to get what they wanted.

The plain-spoken mannerism of the patriarch of the family and his two youngest daughters frequently came into conflict with the matriarch and the eldest sisters' elitism as they boasted of their unclaimable link to the French throne. They refused to see that no matter which man laid down with the mother, the child could lay no claim to parentage unless they were acknowledged by both the father and family. Jacqueline Marie Katherine de Medici may have lain with the King of France, but the daughter they created was conceived above the sheets--not beneath them. Jacqueline refused to be silenced at court about the parentage of the growing child within her. It

was the reason Marie marked her for death. But instead of a curse on mother and unborn child, the midnight escaped to Scotland became a blessing as the people's revolution sought out the privileged nobles.

In the highlands, Abigail Marie Katherine de Medici was born without a father. The fortune and power of the de Medici family hid the stain but it was never washed away. Having valuable connections in the English and Italian courts, Jacqueline was received as her family's station required. Eventually, she attained a politically well placed estate and fitted herself into the region. Unlike the women born in Scotland, Jacqueline followed her de Medic heritage by keeping control over her assets and her life. But it was her wit and cleverness that turned the estate into one of the most prosperous in the parish.

Abigail was never considered a suitable match for any of the legitimate Clan heirs. The heads of clans refused to allow a match unless the son would take total control of the estate and fortunes.

Jacqueline refused to relinquish her power. Abigail resented her mother for it. Richard Connell had approached her with an offer of marriage; he owned the second largest estate in the Parish. He let it be known that he intended to combine the estates to make himself the largest landowner and the unchallenged heir for the parish leadership.

Jacqueline refused. Instead, she persuaded her daughter to marry Shawn Michael Cullen. Only he was willing to break with tradition. Instead of insisting on control, he offered himself as steward to Jacqueline, claiming nothing for himself and agreeing to allow her to choose who inherited the de Medici affluence

The eldest son of Michael James Cullen. Shawn Michael saw Abigail as an opportunity to restore his clan's fortunes. Reluctantly Abigail agreed; his family estate was not as large as the Connell, but his clan connection opened the path to gain legitimacy and a title. The match was made for the benefit of both families.

Shannon never thought of Seanhair as a woman of wealth and power, only as her Grandmother. None of that interested her, no matter how Seanhair attempted to entice her.

She loved hearing the stories about France before the revolution, but for some reason, both she and Papa were more concerned about her becoming more aware of the estate business. She had already started acting independently. Her decisions carried nearly as much weight as the adults.

Alyssa sensed the connection that Shannon Marie had with her father. It drew her closer to the young woman for it was something she had always wanted and never had for reasons that were beyond her control. The richness of their love bond awakened her own sadness and sense of loss for the father she didn't remember. He had died when she was three. The only things she really knew of him was what her older sister told her. Their mother had stubbornly refused to talk about him.

Without warning, Alyssa reached out to more fully connect with the young redhead.

Suddenly she felt the grass beneath her feet and the breeze on her face. She was no longer an observer, but part of the drama and seeing through Shannon's eyes.

The strange feeling again crept up on Shannon Marie and she stopped halfway up the hill. It seemed to be happening more often. At first, it was only in her dreams that she could sense spirits around her, but now she sensed and saw them while awake. The feelings kept getting more intense and harder to ignore. But this time it was different. Yet, in a way, it felt familiar.

Papa had told her that her Aunt Margaret had the same gift. She could see the Earth Folk and the spirits who had not yet crossed over. She asked Bridget to bless her with the same gift; the night of the next full moon, she had her first dream. Since then, the encounters with the dead had become nightly.

Sighing, Shannon shook her head, trying to clear the thoughts. But instead of vanishing the image of an older woman with reddish hair reached for her. Her greenish eyes were so familiar, yet she had never seen them before. She was not afraid, yet she was reluctant to take her hand. The spirit of the raven flew between them and the woman backed away, but did not leave.

Suddenly Alyssa felt herself being pulled away. She remained connected, yet she was no longer in direct contact with Shannon Marie. The emotional bond that had started to form had been thinned, but not broken.

The raven circled and flew back towards them. Shannon followed its flight and it brought her attention back to the hillside. She did not know why her mind filled itself with such things. It was almost as if someone was trying to give her wisdom she was not ready to understand. Each time the feeling passed, she felt that something important had happened, yet she was unable to see how it fit into her life.

She slowly started to climb the hill again. It was like the lessons Seanhair taught her about the lands and court. It did not interest her, but her grandmother's behavior told her that the lessons were important. None of the information was new. It was all old. Yet, it seemed so essential the closer she got to her seventeenth birthday. Suddenly there were no more stories or gossip about the other clans' secrets or stories about the French court, but only constant testing of what she had learned about the estate.

Reaching the crest, she caught up with Rachael. Shannon Marie pointed to the gathering at the bottom. "I told you Papa would make them wait for us!"

She readjusted her crossbow, freeing it from the fold of her breeches. Her attire was another point of contention between her parents. Breeches, boots, and wool shirts were not proper dress for ladies. Father always snapped back that if she had provided him with a son, he would have left the girls to her raising. But she had not, so she needed to be content with the two older girls. The two younger ones were his to raise as he saw fit. Shannon Marie was grateful he had always won. The

thought of being turned into a court pony turned her stomach. She would disappear into the marshes first.

“Hot damn!” Diverting from the path, Rachael leaped a fallen log for no other reason than it was there and ran down towards the gathering at the bottom.

Shannon Marie stopped for a moment. The sun was warm on her face. The lush greenery of early summer was old enough to be fully developed, yet young enough to still have a multitude of shades of green. For a moment, she felt homesick as if she had been away for a long time. She blinked and the feeling vanished as quickly as it had come.

As with the island and their people, the greenery was young and old at the same time. She did not regret stopping to honor the forest peoples and her ancestors even if had made them late. It was part of her tradition. Leaving them bits of food and coins every full moon within their circle was such a small thing, but it was enough to honor all those who had gone before. In this moment, she felt happy and at peace.

Below, parish men and youths were preparing for May Day. It was their time to boast and show off their skills with bow, horse, and sword. Only the best could chase the spring maiden in hopes of marrying her.

Last year, Papa had persuaded the Parish Chief to allow her to represent the family in some of the events with the younger boys. She had done well coming in second with her crossbow and third with her sword.

This year she planned to be first. She would miss competing with her bow. She had switched to the crossbow because each time she learned how and compensated for her breasts, they seemed to get bigger. It hurt terribly when she released the bowstring and it hit them. Seanhair promised that they would eventually stop getting bigger.

Michael had teased her so she pushed him face first into the river. He jumped up sputtering. Rachael and Scott had laughed at them both when he eventually caught her and paid her back in kind.

Rachael was going to be able to compete this year with her staff. It would be her first time. Hopefully, not her last. At least for a couple of years, she wouldn't be the only girl competing. Scott not being there, dampened Rachael's excitement. He had been sent to the monastery, not for religious reasons, but to get him the education he would need to properly represent the Parish and his clan.

No longer did the English court respect the old ways. In order to gain regard in the English, they needed a representative that spoke their language and understood their customs, while still being linked to the Parish. Scott was chosen for his instinctive good nature and his quick mind. He knew how to get around the monks, while still being able to keep his faith and learning everything he

could from them. However, he agreed to go because it gave him special standing in the parish that overshadowed his birthright and made him eligible to marry Rachael.

At least, they would find happiness together. Growing up, it had always been the four of them-- Michael and Shannon Marie and Rachael and Scott. They had created their own bonded tribe. As children, they would go out on scouting raids. Tracking down imagined enemies of the Parish during which their hunting instincts intertwined beyond the need for verbal communication. As they grew, the foursome became two couples, yet the bonds never broke. When Scott left, their connection had been stretched, but it had not been broken. Shannon Marie sighed. They all missed him; Rachael had not been the same since. The two of them had a soul connection. At night, they visited each other in their dreams. Once Shannon had been awakened by Rachael talking in her sleep. At the foot of Rachael's bed, Scott stood, watching her sleep. When he saw her, he smiled and vanished like a ghostly apparition.

Shaking her head, she cleared the gloomy thoughts from her mind. It was going to be a glorious day. In the afternoon, she would compete; that night, she was going to be presented to the court. Seanhair was going to announce she was naming her legal heir to the de Medici titles and estates. Even with her little knowledge of the court, she knew it was going to be a rude surprise to many.

From below, Papa called her name and waved her to come to join them. For a moment, she stood there looking at him as if she was seeing him for the first time. He could not be considered tall, yet he was not short. His posture was that of a proud man, who knew the meaning of work and warfare. Held back in a silver clasp, his chestnut-colored hair hung just past his shoulders. A full beard partially covered his oval face. Across the distance, she could not see the bluish-green of his eyes, yet she knew they held an equal amount of love and impatience. Shawn Michael Cullen liked order; she didn't always meet his standards, but he loved her anyway.

Smiling, she weaved her way down the path. The bushes gently brushed against her like angel wings as she quickly joined the clans on the field.

The clans were separated in a semi-circle around the field of combat. Although it was called combat, the only event that permitted physical contact was for the young men who had earned enough points to compete for the spring maiden. But that was not for the younger competitors; only those who had been invited by respect or by winning the challenge learned what happened deep within the forest.

But Shannon had no interest in what the rutting beasts, as Papa called them, did in the forest on Beltane night; her only concern was making the Cullen clan proud.

“You were late my Little Elf.” Papa chided loud enough for the others to hear.

“Tonight is the full moon.” Shannon looked up into his bluish-green eyes. “I needed to honor our ancestors and tonight I won't be able to.”

He winked. "The Clan Elders are doing you a great courtesy. You need to honor them by arriving on time. You dishonor our clan by making us all wait."

"Yes, Papa." Shannon nodded and walked to the judging table where the other elders were gathered. She stood before them and slightly bowed. "I have dishonored my family by my tardiness. I was honoring my ancestors. That isn't an excuse. How may I make amends?"

"Heathen! We waited for nothing." Richard Connell grumbled. "She should be back with the rest of the women preparing the feast!"

Shawn Michael clenched his fists and marched to stand beside her, squaring off with the slightly older man. "My daughter was paying respects. As she was taught."