

CHAPTER ONE

“You have changed my life. Given me hope.” His hand traced down my side, dipped to my waist. Stroked along my hip and down my thigh. “You are light where there was only darkness.”

I turned into him. We lay on my bed in the shadows. His eyes, even in the dimness of moonlight, were haunted. It was dark, and yet I could call to mind their deep green color as easily as I could the shape of my own hand. He was mortal and only a couple of years older than me, but sometimes those eyes made him seem as ancient as any vampire.

That gaze was heavy on me now. Drawn to me only.

“Ronan,” I whispered.

But he was done with talking. He pulled me closer and kissed me softly. I savored the feel of lips I could draw from memory. How long I’d studied every inch of that face, and yet so few days had passed since it’d been mine to touch.

He drew back. Those eyes, so soulful and all-seeing, remained locked on me. “Why are you with him when you should be with me?”

My throat clenched. *Carden*. My affection for the ancient Scottish vampire ran deep. The bond I shared with him infused my blood.

But this thing I felt for Ronan, it went beyond chemical. It penetrated a secret heart I didn’t realize I had.

Ronan must’ve seen the thoughts flicker across my face because he brushed the hair from my forehead, as though he might sweep my mind clear. “Let’s run away. We’ll disappear. Live in

some faraway place.” His voice was suddenly husky with intensity.

“But I’m...”

I was...what? In love with Carden?

Was I? How was that possible when all my mind could summon was Ronan?

“I’m with Carden,” I said finally. We shared a bond—a bond that might endanger me were it severed.

He pulled away completely then and rolled onto his back, leaving a Ronan-sized chill along one side of my body.

“You’re with Carden because you bonded,” he told me, his voice tight. “By accident. It’s naught more than a chemical reaction. You might as well be bonded to a drug. It’s your blood that calls for Carden.” He swung that tormented gaze back to me, and it was like the tide, mysterious and powerful, sucking me in and down. “But your heart? Tell me, Ann. What does your heart tell you?”

“My heart?” My heart pumped blood that was bonded to Carden. To cut that bond would be to endure the blood fever. “There’s no way around it,” I said finally. Desperately. “The blood fever...”

I’d been parted once before from my vampire. The physical effects were devastating.

Ronan’s hand flew to my face, cupping my cheek. “The blood fever I can soothe.”

The hope in his voice cracked something inside me.

“How?” Even as I said it, I knew. I took his hand in mine. “Your touch.”

Ronan had the power of persuasive touch. It was what he used to convince kids like me to come to this island of death. The vampires identified us—teenaged misfits, runaways, addicts,

those of us who wouldn't be missed—but it was Tracers like Ronan who traveled the world, hunting us, bringing us to the Isle of Night. Different Tracers had different strengths, and Ronan's was his touch—when he used it, it was enough to persuade anyone to do anything.

I rolled away. “Your touch could help, sure, but for how long? You'd soothe the blood fever, but eventually—”

“It could be gone forever. If you let me try.” He took my arm and pulled me back into the shelter of his body. “I'm strong, Ann. Stronger than you know.”

He was strong. Could he be that strong?

Before, I wouldn't have thought so. But recently I'd seen him unleash his power on a vampire. It'd almost been enough to overcome one as ancient as Master Dagursson. Might it be enough to completely sever a blood bond?

“You must let me try, at least. Think, Ann. You could be parted from him forever. Let me do this for you.” His tone grew earnest then. “For once, let me use my power for good.”

I'd never heard him sound so vulnerable. I'd always known Ronan despised the work he was forced to do. Increasingly, he let me in enough to see just how deeply his hatred ran.

“But how...” The words came so slowly, my mouth frozen. “How...”

I couldn't get the words out. Why was my jaw so leaden? My tongue so thick?

“Be easy,” I heard. There were hands on me. Cool hands. “Be easy, lass.”

I opened my eyes. I was in Carden's arms.

My pulse gave a sharp, defensive kick.

“What...?” I glanced around, trying to make sense of this.

And then my heart plummeted. Just a dream.

“Hush, dove. You were dreaming.” Carden snuggled me closer and placed his palm over my heart. “Your blood races.” His hand swept from my chest and down along my belly, coming to rest heavy over the very core of me. “Was it me you dreamt of?”

My cheeks burned, and I was grateful for the darkness. Slowly my heartbeat returned to normal. Still, it felt as though it was pumping air, not blood.

Guilty guilty guilty.

“You expect me to say? A girl has to maintain some mystery.” I gave him a saucy smile but had to force my lips not to tremble.

His hand skimmed down and around, curling beneath my thigh, and then he swooped me atop him. “Indeed?” He returned my smile. It was wicked and roguish.

Was I imagining the distance in his eyes? Carden was of an ancient Celtic line from which he’d inherited tremendous intuitive powers. Had he sensed he wasn’t the one who haunted my dreams?

I panicked as I bent down to kiss him.

Honestly, it was no great hardship.

Handsome Carden. He was as noble as any knight. Fierce as any warrior. He’d been only nineteen when he turned Vampire hundreds of years ago. His youthful body was frozen in time, and yet his heart was ancient, righteous, belonging to a hero of old.

And that heart loved me. It was intoxicating.

He kissed me back, eagerly, gruffly. There was a growl in his throat. “That’s more like it, my beautiful wee firebrand.”

Unable to stop an abrupt laugh, I sat up, straddling him. He’d called me “dove,” “petal,”

“sunshine,” “bonny,” and once, “hen.” But never “firebrand.”

“Am I that much of a troublemaker?” I asked.

“Oh, aye. In the most magnificent of ways.” He threaded his fingers through my hair and pulled me back to him. The humor in his eyes was smoldering into something hotter. “And now it’s time for show, not tell.”

He kissed me again, but as he did, a part of my mind spun out of my control.

He kissed along my jaw and then whispered in my ear. “Where have you gone, sweetest one?”

Carden was immortal. Powerful. Impossibly so. He placed me above all others. Who wouldn’t want to be with such a creature?

And yet Ronan kept a hold on me.

Which one was true? Which one was love?

For the dozenth time, I shoved such thoughts from my mind. Dreams were just that—fantasies based in unreality. Even if it was the wishful thinking of my unconscious mind, it wasn’t real.

“I’m right here,” I told him as I speared my fingers through his hair to pull his mouth close for another kiss.

I needed to be with Carden. So why did I keep thinking of Ronan? This was crazy.

With Ronan, it’d been just one kiss. Carden and I had shared so much more. I adored him. He’d told me he loved me, and I believed him.

And like that I was lost to my thoughts again. Before I realized what was happening, Carden had stopped kissing me. We were laying side by side. Yet another moment lost to my

overthinking. “Wait.” I propped up on my elbow. “Where are you going?”

Now he was getting up. Donning his plaid.

From faraway came the distant gong of the dawn bell.

“I must hurry,” he said. “And you must lie low. That pup Ronan has set the whole isle to chaos. Taking the misericordia as he did...” He *tsked*.

The misericordia belonged to Sonja, the ruler of *Eyja næturinnar*, this Isle of Night. It was the rarest of weapons, one that could both make and kill vampires. And Carden thought Ronan had stolen it. Had thought it was Ronan who’d used it to kill Dagursson.

But it was me. Me who’d risked all to take it. Me, Dagursson’s killer.

In letting people believe he was the culprit, Ronan was protecting *me*.

Yet another secret I kept from Carden. Yet more guilt.

“Foolish, foolish boy,” he continued. “He thinks to take the most powerful weapon in all vampiredom.”

“Is it really that powerful?” My question came out weakly.

“Aye, and what else?” Carden nearly scoffed. “All want the misericordia. All would kill for it. *I* would kill for it.”

His words chilled me.

Ronan had been right. He’d told me how any vampire—Carden included—would want the misericordia for their own ends. He had insisted I not tell anyone the part I’d played in its disappearance. Seeing as Ronan had risked all to direct attention away from me, I had to honor his wishes. I’d keep our secret.

All our secrets.

Carden sat on the bed to lace up his boots. “With Dagursson dead, there is a power vacuum.”

It took me a second to follow the topic change.

“And you know how nature loves a vacuum,” I joked weakly. It was all I could muster. This chat with Carden was skirting every single white lie I’d ever told. It was pretty unsettling.

Dagursson had allied with Ronan’s sister, Charlotte. Charlotte, who was probably out there this minute, plotting my untimely death. She was a vampire now, and Ronan had been as shocked as I was when she’d appeared. Apparently, she was a little sassier—and a lot deadlier—than when he’d last seen her.

I tried to calm myself. “But Dag was just a weirdo etiquette teacher, right? So he’d been in charge of the scrolls—he can’t have been the only vampire who’s able to translate those things. How does his death change anything?”

Carden pinned me with an uncharacteristically grave look. “Don’t mistake me. I dance on that Viking bastard’s grave, but his death brings instability. There are those who’ve chosen sides, who are making their secret loyalties known.”

“Secret loyalties?” Why was my face burning? Sure, I had a secret or two, but it wasn’t a “secret loyalty.”

“Aye, not all support Fournier,” he said, referring to the headmaster of the Isle. “Perhaps not even Alcántara. And it seems some of those scrolls are missing. The pup thinks to steal the lore for himself.”

This was news to me. I knew Ronan had burned a couple of Dagursson’s scrolls, precious for the knowledge they held about genealogies and vampire blood lines. But had he returned to

the scene of the crime to pilfer more?

“I never thought Ronan the power-hungry sort,” Carden said with a shake of his head.

“So what is he thinking?” He pinned a sudden look on me. “Is that pup doing an errand for you?”

“Stop calling him ‘pup.’” My voice was sharper than I’d intended. I forced my next words to come out calm and even. “What kind of errand would he do for me, anyway?”

“Your mother,” he said, going in a direction I hadn’t expected. “Those scrolls might lead him to her.”

“Could they?” I felt a familiar spike in my chest—the waning and waxing of hope and despair. “What would the scrolls have to do with my mother? They’re old as dirt, and she can’t be much older than forty.”

“Aye, but word is, she’s kept company with those who are even more ancient than I.”

Carden had recognized my mother from a photo. For weeks, I’d thought he’d disappeared, but he’d actually gone in search of her. He’d found only a cold trail, but for me it was enough. Now that I knew she might be alive, my dream, above all else, was to find her.

“We could look for her,” I said. “You and me.” I stared at him in the dawning light. He was steadfast and affectionate. Caring and carefree. He was incredibly appealing, and I adored him. He’d been there for many of my darkest hours with that rakish smile and easy laugh. “We could run away. We’d be together. We could be happy.”

The words left the taste of dust in my mouth, so much an echo of what Ronan had said to me in the dream. But I couldn’t imagine either of them wanting to run away, much less with me.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, wanting to challenge him. To actually *see* that he loved me rather than merely hear the words. “We’ll leave here. Find my mother. Then run off



somewhere and just...be.”

His gaze became distant at the mention of my mother. All thoughts of love fled as I suddenly feared that he was hiding something about her.

“What?” Maybe my mother didn’t want to see me, didn’t want to be found. I hadn’t seen her since I was four. Years change a person. And why had she left in the first place? “What does that look mean? Do you know something?”

“Only that it’s too soon.” He scooted closer to me and spoke gently. “Things need to settle here before we make any moves. The Directorate is on alert. We couldn’t leave now.”

“But...if things are so unsettled, isn’t it a good time to leave?” I mustered a smile, wondering what he wasn’t saying.

His eyes were shuttered. “There’s much to do yet. Much that keeps me here.” But then, as if a light switched on inside him, his attention for me returned. “Our day will come.”

*Our day will come.* Why did I hear something else in those words? Something that went beyond our relationship to encompass the balance of power on *Eyja næturinnar*.

