

MASQUERADE

By

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MASQUERADE

See me
the man I was
before the darkness
fell upon my soul

Know me
the monster
who hides his ugliness
in the shadows
of the night

Release me
from my lonely prison
let your light drive the bitterness
from my tortured heart

Love me
free me
from this endless
masquerade

—A. Ashley

Chapter One

Los Angeles, 1993

He was a very old vampire, weary of living, weary of coming alive only in the darkness of the night.

For three hundred years he had wandered the unending road of his life alone, his existence maintained at the expense of others, until the advent of blood banks made it possible to satisfy his hunger without preying on the innocent and unsuspecting.

And yet, there were times, as now, when the need to draw warm blood from a living, breathing soul was overpowering.

He stood in the shadows outside the Ahmanson, watching groups of happy, well-dressed people exit the theater. He listened to snatches of their conversation as they discussed the play. He'd seen the show numerous times; perhaps, he thought wryly, because he could so easily sympathize with the Phantom of the Opera. Like Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's tragic hero, he, too, was forced to live in the shadows, never to walk in the warmth of the summer sun, never able to disclose his true identity.

And so he stood on the outskirts of mortality, breathing in the fragrance of the warm-blooded creatures who passed him by. They hurried along, blissfully unaware that a monster was watching, drinking in the myriad smells of their humanity, sensing their happiness, their sorrows, their deepest fears.

He waited until the crowds had thinned, and then he began to follow one of the numerous street beggars who had been hustling the theater patrons. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of homeless men roaming the streets of Los Angeles. On any given night you could find a dozen or so lingering outside the

Ahmanson, hoping for a handout that would buy them a bottle and a few hours of forgetfulness.

A faint grimace played over his lips as he drew near his prey.

After tonight there would be one less beggar haunting Hope Street.

Chapter Two

He was there again, standing on the corner, his long angular face bathed in the hazy glow of the streetlight.

Leanne felt his hooded gaze move over her as she left the side entrance and made her way toward the parking lot across the street. Behind her, she could hear the excitement build as Davis Gaines, who many considered to be L.A.'s best Phantom, appeared at the stage door to sign autographs and pose for pictures.

She was unlocking the car door when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Startled, she whirled around.

It was him. Up close, he was even more handsome than she had thought. His face was made up of sharp planes and angles, totally masculine, totally mesmerizing. His hair was black and straight and fell well past his shoulders. His eyes were an intense shade of blue, and as her gaze met his, she knew she had been waiting a lifetime for this moment, this man.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said in a deep, resonant voice. He held out a theater program. "I was hoping you'd sign this for me."

Leanne smiled. "Why would you want my autograph? I'm only in the chorus."

"But you have such a lovely voice."

She laughed softly. "You must have excellent hearing, to pick my voice out of dozens of others."

His smile was devastating. "My hearing is quite good for a man of my age."

Leanne's gaze moved over him curiously. She didn't know how

old he was, of course, but he didn't look to be much more than thirty at most.

He offered her a pen, one brow raised in question.

"Who should I make it out to?" Leanne asked.

"Jason Blackthorne."

"Blackthorne." She gazed up at him intently. "Why does that name sound so familiar to me?"

"Does it?"

She nodded, then took the pen from his hand. He read the inscription over her shoulder:

"To Jason, May you always have someone to love, and someone to love you. Leanne"

He felt a catch at his heart. Someone to love... Jolene. Leanne's resemblance to his first and only love was uncanny.

He smiled his thanks as she handed him the program, his gaze moving over her face, lingering on her mouth before moving to the pulse that beat in her throat. She was small, petite, with skin that looked as though it rarely saw the sun, hair the color of sun-kissed earth, and luminous green eyes fringed with dark lashes. She wore a Phantom sweatshirt, a pair of black tights that clung to her shapely legs like a second skin, and sneakers.

Jason clenched his hands at his sides as he fought the urge to take her into his arms, to touch those lips with his own, to sip the sweet crimson nectar from her veins.

Leanne frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"No. I was just wondering if we might go somewhere for a drink."

She should say no. There were a lot of sick people running around these days, obsessive fans, psychotics,,and yet there was something in Jason Blackthorne's eyes that made her trust him implicitly.

"I know a little place not far from here," she suggested with a tentative smile.

"I'll follow you in my car," Jason said, somewhat surprised by her ready acceptance of his invitation. Didn't she read the papers? Muggings and rapes and murders were rampant in the city.

A faint smile tugged at his lips as he crossed the parking lot to his own car. Indeed, he mused as he slid behind the steering wheel, she would be far safer with one of the city's lowlifes than she was with him.

The bar was located on a narrow side street. He knew a moment's hesitation as he followed her inside, and then sighed with relief. There were no mirrors in sight.

They took a booth in the rear. She ordered a glass of red wine, as did he.

"So," Jason said, "tell me about yourself."

"What would you like to know?"

She felt his gaze move over her face, soft as candlelight. "Everything."

"I'm twenty-three," Leanne said, mesmerized by his gaze. "I'm an only child. My parents live in Burbank, but I have a small apartment not far from the theater." She smiled at him, a shy intimate smile. "Someday I hope to make it to Broadway."

"Have you a boyfriend?"

"No."

You have now.

Did he speak the words aloud, or was her mind playing tricks on her, echoing words she wished to hear?

"How long have you been with the play?"

"Two years."

"I hear it'll be closing soon. What will you do then?"

"I'm not sure."

"How long have you been acting?"

"This is my first role." Leanne smiled. "I always wanted to be on stage, and I decided, what the heck, why not go for it? So, I tried out and they hired me." She put her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her hands. "What do you do?"

"I'm a cop." The lie rolled easily off his lips.

"You're kidding!" He didn't look like any police officer she'd ever seen. Dressed in a loose fitting white sweater, a pair of black jeans, and cowboy boots, he looked more like a movie star than a cop.

One black brow lifted slightly- "I take it you don't care for the police."

"No, no, it's just that..." She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "You don't look like a cop."

"How's that?"-

"No mustache," Leanne said, running a fingertip over his upper

lip. "All the cops I know have a mustache."

Jason grunted softly. "And do you know a lot of cops?"

"Not really. Where do you work?"

"Hollenbeck."

"That's a rough area."

Jason shrugged. "I like it." Their drinks had arrived during their conversation, but neither had paid much attention. Now, Jason picked up his glass. "What shall we drink to?"

Leanne lifted her glass. "Long life and happiness?" she suggested.

"Happiness," he repeated softly. "I'll drink to that."

"And long life?"

His gaze was drawn to her throat, to where her pulse beat strong and steady. "Long life can be a curse," he muttered.

"A curse! What do you mean?"

He dragged his gaze from her neck. "Just what I said. I've seen too many people who've lived past their prime, people with nothing left to live for, with nothing to hope for but a quick death, an end to pain."

"I don't agree. Life is precious at any age."

"And do you think you'd like to live forever?"

"I know I would." She laughed softly. "This conversation is getting too morbid for my taste. Tell me about yourself. What do you do for recreation?"

"Nothing very exciting. Read. Watch TV. Ride my horse."

"You have a horse? Where do you keep it?"

"I have a small ranch in the hills, nothing elaborate."

"I've always loved horses. Do you think I could ride sometime?"

Jason frowned. "I sleep days, so I usually ride at night."

"How romantic," she said, her voice low and husky. "Perhaps we could go riding together sometime."

Jason swallowed hard. Was he imagining things, or was she suggesting more than she was saying? The thought of holding her close, of having his arms around her waist, of burying his face in her hair, her neck, flooded him with desire. He glanced away lest she see the sudden heat, the hunger, that he knew was burning in his eyes.

"It's getting late," he said, tossing a handful of bills on the table. "I'd better let you go home and get some sleep."

"We don't have to go," Leanne replied. "I'm a bit of a night person myself."

"Then we have more in common than a love of horses," Jason replied dryly. "Perhaps we could go to a late movie tomorrow night?"

"Sounds good."

"I'll pick you up at the stage door."

Leanne gazed into the depths of his eyes and felt the instant connection between the two of them, as if their souls had found each other after traveling through years of darkness.

She had been born for this man.

The thought entered her mind, quiet and unshakable, like the answer to a prayer.

Chapter Three

He fed early the next night, his eyes closing in something akin to ecstasy as he emptied a bag of whole blood into a glass and slowly drained the contents, enjoying the taste of it on his tongue.

Only yesterday, he had contemplated putting an end to his life. It would be so easy to terminate his existence, so easy to stand out on the terrace and watch the sun come up one last time.

So easy, but oh, so painful.

Now, as he dressed, he wondered, as he often had in the past, if he possessed the courage he would need to face such an agonizing death.

But it was a moot point. He no longer wished for death. Life was new again, exciting, and all because of Leanne. During the long hours of the day, as he slept the sleep of the undead in the basement of his house, her image had drifted across his mind. That, in itself, was strange, he thought. Never before had his rest been disturbed by images of anyone, living or dead. But even

during the heat of the day, when he usually slept the deepest, he had seen her face, heard the sound of her voice, yearned for the touch of her hand.

Restless, he wandered through his house, trying to see it through her eyes. She would no doubt find it strange that there was no food in the house, that there were no mirrors to be found, not even in the bathrooms. He could easily explain the security bars on the doors and windows. After all, crime was everywhere. The old paintings, the ancient books and scrolls, would not be so easy to explain, not on a cop's salary.

He had collected quite a few masterpieces in the last three hundred years. Paintings thought lost in the wars that had ravaged France and Spain resided in the bedroom; sculptures believed to have been destroyed graced his library. He had one of Shakespeare's original plays, signed by the Bard himself. His basement was crowded with ancient scrolls, with furniture and clothing from ages past.

Perhaps he should have told her he was an antiques dealer. But it was easier to say he was a cop, that he worked the graveyard shift and slept days, that he worked weekends and holidays, and was therefore unable to attend the picnics and parties to which he was occasionally invited.

He paced the floor for an hour and then, unable to wait a moment longer to see her, he drove to the Ahmanson Theater and bought a ticket.

The play mesmerized him, as always. He'd lost count of how many times he'd seen it, had long ago stopped wondering why he found the production so fascinating.

Lost in the dark, he became one with the Opera Ghost, lusting after the fair Christine, knowing in the depths of his aching heart that she would never be his.

He heard the anguish in the Phantom's voice as the Phantom watched Christine find comfort in the arms of the handsome Vicomte de Chagny, felt the deformed man's pain as he cursed her.

But he had eyes only for Leanne. Her presence called to him until he was blind to everyone else on stage, until his pulse beat in time to hers. He felt her excitement as she sang her lines, felt her triumph as the crowd applauded.

As soon as the final curtain came down, he left the theater, eager to see her again, to discover if she was truly as beautiful as he remembered. Surely her eyes could not be so green as those

he'd seen in his dreams, her skin could not be so pale and unblemished. No lips could be so pink and well-shaped; her hair could not be so long, so thick, as he recalled.

And then she was there, walking toward him, smiling as if they had known each other for years instead of a few hours.

She was breathtaking in a pair of slinky black pants and an opaque blouse of some material that clung to her, outlining every delectable curve.

He felt his mouth water just looking at her.

"Let's go," she said, tucking her arm through his.

"My car's in the lot," he said, and for the first time since the dark curse had been bequeathed to him, he felt young and alive.

"Is this yours?" Leanne asked. She hadn't noticed what he was driving last night.

Jason nodded. "Like it?"

Her gaze swept over the sleek curves of the black Porsche. "What's not to like?" She slid into the seat when he opened the car door, her hand stroking the soft leather. "You're not a cop on the take, are you?"

Jason shrugged as he slid behind the wheel and turned the key in the ignition. "No. My grandfather left me quite well off."

"Then why do you work?"

"A man has to do something with his time."

They made small talk on the way to Hollywood. She told him about some of the funny things that had happened on stage, like the time the Phantom's boat went the wrong way, and he told her about the case he was supposedly working on.

After parking the car, they walked hand in hand toward the movie theater.

Inside, they sat in the last row. Of its own volition, his hand took hers. The touch of her fingers entwining with his sent a shock of feeling surging through him, a jolt of such force that it almost took his breath away.

In the darkness his gaze sought hers. She had felt it, too; he could see it in the slightly surprised expression in her eyes, hear it in the sudden intake of her breath, feel it hum between them, alive, palpable.

Time and place were momentarily forgotten as he placed his hand at the back of her head and drew her toward him. Her eyelids fluttered down as his mouth closed over hers.

It was a kiss unlike any he had ever known—sweetly potent, volatile, explosive. His body's reaction to her nearness to the scent of her perfume and the taste of her lips, was instant.

With the rise of his desire came another hunger, one that was more painful than unfulfilled passion, more deadly for the woman in his arms. Unable to help himself, he pressed a kiss to her throat, let his tongue caress the pulse beating there. Tempting, so tempting...

With a low groan he drew away.

"Jason, what's wrong?" Her voice was husky, drugged with desire.

"Nothing." He raked a hand through his hair. "This isn't the time, or the place."

He could see her smiling at him through the darkness, her green eyes smoky with passion.

"Any time," she murmured. "Any place."

"Leanne..."

"I'm shameless, I know, but I can't help myself. I feel as though I've known you all my life. Waited for you all my life."

For a moment he closed his eyes. And then he smiled at her through the darkness.

"We have time, Leanne," he whispered hoarsely. "All the time in the world."

Chapter Four

He sat on the sofa in the living room, his feet resting on a hassock, his gaze fixed on the fire in the raised hearth. The fire served no purpose save that he found it pleasing to look upon. He had no need for its warmth; he felt neither the heat nor the cold, but sitting in front of a fire on a cold night seemed a very human thing to do. And tonight, tormented by memories of his past, he had a strong desire to feel mortal again.

He had been born in a time of great superstition: when a

woman with the gift to heal might be judged a witch and burned at the stake; when people believed that werewolves prowled the forests in the dead of night; when ghosts might be found wandering through castle and hovel alike.

He had never seen a ghost, and he'd never believed in werewolves, but he'd come to believe in vampires. Oh, yes, he'd never forget the night he had learned about vampires.

He'd had an argument with his wife, Jolene. He couldn't remember now what they had quarreled about, but he'd stormed out of the cottage and headed for the tavern, determined to drown his troubles in a mug of ale. He'd been working his way through his third tankard when Marguerite approached him. There had been something about the way she looked at him, the way her dark eyes had caressed him, that had chilled him to the very marrow of his bones and yet... and yet it had drawn him to her side.

Mesmerized by her beauty, by the husky tremor in her voice, he had followed her upstairs. Never before had he been unfaithful to Jolene, but that night it was as if he'd had no control over his passion. And so he had followed her up the narrow wooden stairway and into a life of eternal darkness.

She had taken his blood and returned it to him, then left him just before dawn, warning him that he would need to find a place to hide himself from the sun unless he wished to perish on the morrow.

He had not believed her—until he stepped into the dawn of a new day. The pain of the sun on his face had been excruciating. With a cry he had run into the woods and taken refuge in a cave.

Trembling with pain and fear, he'd become as one drugged, unable to move, only vaguely aware of the ghastly changes taking place in his body as Marguerite's accursed blood wrought the hideous transformation.

He had died that day, and when he awoke that night, he knew his old life was gone.

He had sought Marguerite the next night, begging her to undo what she had done, but she had only laughed softly as her hand caressed his cheek.

"There is no going back, *mon amour*."

"There must be a way!"

"None that I know, except..."

He had grabbed her by the arms, his fingers biting deep into her

cool white flesh. "Except?"

"It is rumored that there is one bloodline that has the power to transform you into a mortal again, but I have no idea as to how it's done. I know only that the power is not in the blood." She shrugged, as if the whole conversation were unimportant. "That's all I know."

"Whose bloodline? Where do I find it?"

"I know not. I care not. I am happy as I am, and have no wish to be mortal again."

She had pried his fingers from her arm, then patted his cheek, much as a mother might comfort a weeping child.

"Give it time, *céeri*. One day you will bless me for what I have done."

Bless her! He would have killed her had he known how. That night, he had gone home to find Jolene frantic with worry, her beautiful face ravaged by tears.

She had been disbelieving when he told her what had happened, disbelieving until the sun came up and she had seen for herself the deathlike lethargy that held him in its grip.

To her credit, she hadn't turned her back on him. Although she had been repulsed by his lust for blood, she had never stopped loving him. Blessed woman that she was, she had kept his secret until the day she died.

And that had been the hardest thing of all to bear, watching his beloved wife grow old and feeble while he stayed forever young and strong. Her soft, unblemished skin had wrinkled with the passing years, her hair, as fine as black silk, had turned white, the joy of living had gone out of her eyes, those beautiful green eyes that had ever looked on him with love.

It had been torment of the worst kind, watching her sicken and die. In desperation he had offered to save her, to make her into what he had become, but she had refused, and in the end, she had died in his arms, whispering his name.

In his youth he had been zealously religious. Always, he had believed in a just and loving God. He had been faithful in his prayers, certain they were heard. But now he was cut off from the powers of heaven, unable to offer a prayer on behalf of his wife.

That night, for the first time since Marguerite had turned him into a monster, he had contemplated putting an end to his existence. Considered it and found he lacked the courage, for far

worse than the thought of dying was the knowledge that, in death, he would come face-to-face with the Almighty and have to confess his sins.

In all the years since Jolene's death, he had kept a tight rein on his emotions, never letting anyone get close to him. He had no friends, mortal or otherwise. At any rate, trusting one of the undead could be as dangerous to his existence as trusting the living, and so he had trusted no one, loved no one.

Until now.

He thought of Leanne, and her memory engulfed him with a warm, sustaining glow. She had brought light to his existence, given him a reason to live, pierced the protective wall he'd erected around his heart and forced him to accept that he had fallen in love again.

Fallen in love with a woman who looked enough like Jolene to be her sister.

A long, slow sigh escaped his lips. He could not endure the agony of watching another woman he loved grow old and die, nor could he be responsible for giving her the Dark Gift. Leanne was a creature of sunshine. He could not condemn her to a life spent in the shadows...

And yet he could not think of facing the future without her, not now, when he had glimpsed her goodness, felt the sweet magic that had flowed between them the moment their eyes met for the first time.

* * *

He was tired of meeting her after the theater and spending the evening in a darkened movie house or a smoke-filled bar, and since he dared not go to her house, which no doubt contained several mirrors, he brought her home.

Never before had he brought a woman into the house. He bade her wait in the entry hall while he went inside and lit the candles. No doubt she would think it strange that he eschewed electric

lights, but he much preferred candlelight to lamp light.

Returning to the entry hall, he bowed over her hand. "Welcome," he said and kissed her hand in courtly fashion.

"Do you mind if I look around?" Leanne asked.

"Please," he said. "Make my home yours."

Leanne wandered through the house, enchanted by the works of art, the sculpture. Several of the paintings were signed J. Blackthorne. The signature was bold and distinctive.

"Blackthorne," she exclaimed softly. "Of course. I saw one of his paintings in a museum." She turned to look at Jason, a question in her eyes.

"An ancestor," Jason said, "prolific but mostly unappreciated."

Leanne studied the larger of the paintings. It portrayed a tall, dark-haired man standing alone on a sea cliff. A black cape swirled around his shoulders, buffeted by the wind. Dark gray clouds hovered above storm-tossed waves. Just looking at the painting filled her with a sense of loneliness, of emptiness. "He was very good," she remarked.

Jason shrugged. "For his time, perhaps."

With a nod Leanne continued her tour, ever conscious that Jason was only a step or two behind her.

The rooms were sparsely furnished, and she noticed he had only a few small table lamps, none of which he turned on, obviously preferring the softer, more romantic glow of the candles that lit every room, even the bathrooms.

The living room was decorated in earth tones. A sofa faced the fireplace; there were two matching over-stuffed chairs on either side of the hearth. A book on ancient Rome sat on a carved oak table beside the couch. Heavy beige draperies covered the windows.

The master bedroom was decorated in shades of blue and white. Standing in the doorway, she had the oddest impression that the bed had never been slept in; indeed, she had the feeling that the room had rarely been used at all. Adjoining the master bedroom was a large bathroom with a sunken tub and a skylight.

In an enormous den next to the bedroom two of the walls were lined with bookshelves that reached from floor to ceiling. She paused in front of one of the bookshelves, her gaze perusing the titles. She saw Shakespeare and Homer, Louis L'Amour and Stephen King, Tom Clancy and Anne Rice's Vampire books, as

well as numerous books on history and geography, medicine, art, literature, and folklore, many of which were written in foreign languages.

"Have you read all these?" she asked, amazed by the quantity and variety of books. Some of them appeared quite old, judging by their fragile covers.

"Not all," Jason replied.

Leanne smiled, thinking it would take a hundred years to read every book on the shelves.

Turning away from the bookshelf, she glanced around the room. A beautiful black marble fireplace took up most of the third wall. The fourth wall contained a large window that was covered with heavy floor-to-ceiling drapes. A big, comfortable-looking black leather chair stood in front of the hearth.

Leaving the den, she peered into the kitchen, noting that it was stark and white. Again, she was overcome with the impression that, like the bedroom, the kitchen was rarely, if ever, used. But then maybe that wasn't so strange. Jason was a bachelor, after all. Maybe he ate all his meals out.

"So," he said as they returned to the living room, "what do you think?"

"It's very nice." She made a broad gesture with her hand. "I think I like the den the best."

"Yes, it's my favorite, too."

Leanne crossed the floor to the picture window that overlooked the backyard and pulled back the heavy curtains. A full moon hovered low in the sky, bathing the grass and the outbuildings in shimmering silver.

"Is your horse here?"

"Yes."

"Could I see it?"

"If you like."

Taking her hand, he led her out the back door and down a narrow flight of steps. They followed a narrow winding path edged with ferns and willow trees until they reached a large corral.

Jason whistled softly, and a dark shape materialized out of the shadows.

"Hello, Lucifer," he murmured, scratching the big black horse between its ears. "I've brought someone to meet you."

Leanne held out her hand, and the stallion danced away, its nostrils flaring, its eyes showing white.

"I don't think he likes me," she said, disappointment evident in her voice.

"We don't get many visitors here," Jason remarked. Slipping through the rails, he walked up to the horse, and stroked its neck.

Like all animals, the stallion had been wary of him in the beginning, but Jason had used his dark power to overcome the animal's instinctive fear.

Now, he vaulted lightly onto Lucifer's back and rode around the corral, guiding the stallion with the pressure of his knees.

Leanne clapped her hands in delight. "That's wonderful!" she exclaimed, charmed by the fluid grace of the horse, the sheer masculine beauty of the man. They looked as though they'd been made for each other, the devil black horse and the raven-haired man.

Jason rode effortlessly, his body in complete harmony with the stallion's. Like a dark angel, he rode bareback in the light of the moon.

After a few moments he rode toward the gate and slipped the latch. Riding up to Leanne, he held out his hand.

"Don't you need a bridle or something to control him?" she asked dubiously.

"No. He responds to my voice and the pressure of my legs."

The stallion's ears twitched as Jason lifted Leanne onto its back, and then they were riding down a sloping path that led to a trail into the hills.

Jason breathed in Leanne's scent as they rode through the quiet night, the only sound that of the horse's muffled hoofbeats and the chirping of crickets.

His thighs cradled her buttocks, his arm circled her waist, the fall of her hair brushed his cheek. He had only to lean forward to press a kiss to the side of her neck, and as he did so, he felt the longing to sink his fangs into the soft skin of her neck, to taste the warm rush of her blood over his tongue.

She leaned against him, her back pressing against his chest, her nearness sparking the embers of desire that were ever present when she was near.

"Jason?"

He grunted in response, unable to speak past the loathsome

need rising swiftly within him, the need to drink of her sweetness, to possess her fully.

"Could we stop here for a while?"

He glanced around. They were in a small glade surrounded by tall trees. Wordlessly, he slid from the back of the horse, then reached up to help Leanne dismount. His hands lingered at her waist, and he drew her up against him, letting her feel the evidence of his desire, afraid she would refuse him, more afraid that she might not.

Leanne took a deep breath. It was all happening so quickly. She felt the pull of his gaze, felt herself falling helplessly in love with a man she hardly knew—a man she wanted to know better.

"Jason, tell me I'm not dreaming, that the magic between us is real and not just something I've imagined because I want it so badly."

"It's real. Never doubt that."

His eyes were dark, the blue-black before a storm. A lock of hair, as black as ink fell across his forehead. For a moment she felt as if he were a part of the night, a dark phantom who had stepped out of one of her dreams.

Compelled by a need she never thought to question, she reached up to touch his cheek, to assure herself he was real.

"Leanne." He murmured her name in a voice filled with longing, and she had no thought to deny him.

She lifted her face, eager for his kiss, her eyelids fluttering down as his head bent toward hers.

He hesitated only a moment, battling the ancient urge to drive his fangs into her throat, to mingle her blood with his.

Instead, he kissed her gently, careful not to bruise her tender flesh. As if she were made of glass that might shatter at the slightest touch, he held her in his arms, his body basking in her warmth, in the essence of life that flowed through her.

Holding her close, he was keenly aware of the vast gulf between them. She was light and hope and innocence, children playing in the sun, lovers strolling on the beach on a hot summer day, all the things that were forever lost to him. He was the essence of darkness. It permeated his life and shrouded his soul. He groaned low in his throat, his arms tightening around her, as he sought to draw a part of her goodness into himself.

In the beginning, after he had resigned himself to Jolene's loss,

to the fact that he was forever different, forever cursed, he had gloried in being a vampire. His hearing was keen, his eyesight much improved. He discovered he could cover great distances with preternatural speed. He had thought the taste of blood would disgust him, but it was a part of what he had become, and he had learned to accept it. What could not be changed must be endured.

In the beginning he had not realized how long forever was. He had not understood how truly alienated he was from the rest of mankind. With the coming of awareness, he had lost himself in learning. Later, he had discovered to his amazement that he could paint, and he had spent a century perfecting his talent, and when he grew bored with painting, he had tried his hand at writing.

It had come easily to him, and he had written scores of novels, many of which he had sold. And when writing lost its charm, he had turned into a vagabond, traveling from one end of the world to the other, but nowhere had he found a sense of home, of belonging, and so he had come back to America, a land where the bizarre was taken for granted, a place where a man who lived like a recluse was not considered odd at all.

But now Leanne was here, in his arms, and for the first time in three hundred years he felt a sense of belonging.

"Leanne," he murmured. "Can you save me, I wonder."

She drew back, a frown furrowing her brow. "Save you?"

Only then did he realize he'd spoken aloud.

"Save you from what?"

"Nothing." He gazed into her eyes, knowing the hunger was glowing in his own. "We'd better go back."

She didn't argue, only continued to stare up at him, her expression filled with concern and another emotion he could not quite fathom. Was it fear?

And then, to his surprise, she gently stroked his cheek. "Don't be afraid, Jason," she said quietly. "You're not alone anymore."

Before he could absorb the meaning of her words, a dog came charging through the trees, saliva dripping from its massive jaws.

Instantly, Jason thrust Leanne behind him, putting himself between her and the animal's slathering jaws. A sharp command kept Lucifer from bolting down the hill.

Summoning his dark power, Jason fixed his gaze on the dog. As though it had slammed into a brick wall, the beast came to an abrupt halt. Whining softly, it eyed Jason for a moment, then

turned and ran, its tail between its legs.

Leanne blew out the breath she'd been holding. Never had she seen anything like that in her life.

"We'd best go," Jason said, and before she had time to argue, before she had time to ask questions, he lifted her onto the back of the horse, then swung up effortlessly behind her and kicked the stallion into a canter.

When they reached the house, he lifted Leanne from the back of the horse, then put the stallion into the corral and latched the gate.

"Jason, that dog..."

"It's getting late." He drew her into his arms and kissed her. "Will you be all right getting home?"

"Fine," she murmured, all thought of the dog forgotten in the afterglow of his kiss.

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I'm counting on it."

Jason nodded. He yearned to read her mind, to discover what she thought of him, but for the first time in his life, he could not bring himself to steal his way into another's thoughts.

"Goodnight, Jason. Sleep well."

He kissed her once more, briefly, sweetly, and then, reluctantly, he let her go. Already, he could feel dawn coming, feel the heavy lassitude stealing over his body, draining his strength, dragging him down, down, into darkness.

His steps were heavy as he made his way to the basement. Hollywood might insist that their vampires sleep in silk-lined coffins, but then Hollywood perpetuated a lot of myths that had no basis in fact. He had no need to rest in a coffin; indeed, he found the idea macabre. Instead, he preferred to pass the daylight hours resting in a corner of the cellar, his head and shoulders covered by a patchwork quilt similar to the one he had once shared with Jolene.

Chapter Five

He saw her almost every night after that. She arrived at his house shortly after eleven and stayed until the early hours of the morning.

It was a routine that fit his with remarkable precision. He never had to worry about offering her food because of the lateness of the hour. An occasional cup of coffee, a glass of wine, were all she ever asked for.

Often, they went riding in the moonlight, sharing the quiet intimacy of the night.

Sometimes, as now, they sat on the sofa, watching television. Tonight they were watching *Love at First Bite* starring George Hamilton as the infamous Count Dracula in an affectionate spoof of vampire movies.

"He's a very romantic night creature," Leanne remarked. "With you, never a quickie, always a longie..." She grinned impishly as she quoted a line from the movie.

Jason arched one brow as he watched George Hamilton hurrying down a New York street moments before the coming dawn, his black cape swirling behind him like the devil's breath. Romantic, indeed?

He caressed Leanne's cheek with the tip of his finger. "And would you let the count bite your neck if you had the chance?"

Leanne poked him playfully in the ribs. "Oh, I think I'd let Mr. Hamilton bite anything he liked."

"Have you ever thought of what it would be like to be a vampire?"

"Sure, who hasn't?" Leanne smiled at him, her deep green eyes dancing with laughter. "I mean, except for the blood part, the thought of living forever is very appealing, although I'm not sure I'd want to turn into a bat."

The blood. His gaze moved to the pulse in her neck. He could hear the blood moving through her veins, smell the heat of it, the warmth. The thought of drinking from her sickened him even as it excited him.

"And do you believe in vampires?" he asked, his voice low and seductive.

Leanne's gaze met his, all humor gone from her expression. "Yes, I do." She lifted one brow. "You look surprised."

"I am. Most people don't believe in monsters."

"There are all kinds of monsters."

"Indeed." He glanced at the television, his stomach muscles tightening as George Hamilton enveloped Susan Saint James in the folds of his voluminous black cape to give her the final bite that would change her into a vampire.

He felt Leanne's hand on his thigh, felt his mouth water at the thought of giving her the vampire's kiss.

"Is something wrong, Jason?"

He shook his head, and then, unable to keep from touching her, he drew her into his arms and kissed her.

His touch went through her like lightning, igniting every nerve ending, every sense of awareness. His tongue plundered her mouth, stealing her breath away, until she thought she would faint. He whispered her name, his voice urgent, almost rough, as though he were in pain.

She felt his hands slide under her sweater to settle on her bare back, felt the tremors that coursed through him as his fingertips caressed her quivering flesh. His kiss deepened, taking her to places she'd never been. His intensity frightened her even as it excited her. He seemed to know exactly what she liked, what she wanted... what she needed.

She gasped with pleasure as she felt his teeth nip at the lobe of her ear, then nibble the side of her neck. Desire shot through her, and with it an image of darkness that went beyond black.

"Jason!" Alarmed, she drew back.

The light in his eyes burned brighter than any candle, hotter than any sun. His breathing was erratic, his lips slightly parted. She watched him draw several deep breaths, felt the effort it cost him to release her.

"I'm sorry," he rasped. "Forgive me."

"It's all right. I'm as much to blame as you are."

"No." He couldn't keep his hands from shaking, couldn't keep his gaze from returning time and again to the pulse beating so rapidly in her throat.

Rising, he extended his hand. "Come, I'll walk you to your car."

She didn't want to go home, she wanted to stay, to spend what was left of the night in his arms, but leaving was definitely the smart thing to do.

Another moment, and she would have lost all control.

Another second, and she would have given him whatever he wanted.

Hand in hand, they walked down the stairs to the driveway.

Jason opened the car door for her, kissing her cheek before she slid behind the wheel.

She closed the door, then rolled down the window and leaned out for one last kiss.

He covered her mouth with his, drinking deeply of her innocence. "Don't come tomorrow night," he said, and before she could ask why, he turned away, taking the stairs two at a time.

From the window in the living room he watched her drive away, wondering if she had any idea of the danger she'd been in.

* * *

He sat in his favorite chair in front of the fireplace in the den, his hands clenched into tight fists as he listened to the sound track from *The Phantom of the Opera*. The haunting words of the Phantom's plaintive cry as he pleaded for Christine's love filled the room, echoing in Jason's heart.

The Phantom's music of the night might be a ballad of love and longing, Jason thought, but his own song was a requiem of blood and death, of darkness as deep and wide as eternity, as bottomless as the bowels of hell.

The Phantom of the Opera had lived in the darkness of life, Jason mused bitterly, but he was trapped in the everlasting darkness of his soul.

He shuddered to think how close he had come to wrapping Leanne in his embrace, to quenching his unholy thirst by stealing the essence of life from a creature who was pure and innocent.

He could not see her again. He loved her too much to put her life in danger, to risk turning her into the kind of monster he had become.

There was no hope for him, but he would not defile Leanne. She was a beautiful woman, made to walk in the sun, to find love in the arms of a mortal man and bear his children.

A hoarse cry rose in his throat, a cry that became an anguished scream of denial as he imagined her in the arms of another man, a man who could take her walking on the beach, who could make love to her in the light of day, a man who didn't live in the shadows.

A man who didn't thirst for that which made him a thief of the worst kind, stealing life itself.

* * *

For the next week he tormented himself by going to the theater, watching her perform on stage, hearing the sweet magic of her voice.

He listened to the Phantom's anguish with renewed pain. Just once, he thought, just once he'd like to see Christine turn her back on Raoul, the Vicomte de Chagny, and give the Phantom of the Opera the love he craved, the love only she could give.

When the show was over, he hovered in the deep shadows to make sure Leanne made it safely to her car. It was the worst kind of torture, seeing her from a distance, hungering for her touch, yearning to hear the sound of his name on her lips.

Each night he saw her gaze sweep the crowds waiting at the stage door, the hope in her eyes fading when she didn't see him.

And now he stood in the shadows again, a tall figure dressed all in black. Couples passed him by, never knowing he was there. Frustrated beyond reason, hating what he was because it kept him from the woman he loved, it took every ounce of his self-control to keep from destroying the innocent creatures who passed him by. He was torn with the need to lash out, to hurt others as he was hurting.

He watched a young couple pass by, and he wanted to sink his fangs into the man's throat, to turn the man into a monster so that

the woman at his side would look at him with loathing instead of desire.

He fought down the growing lust for blood as he saw Leanne coming down the sidewalk. She was late tonight, and he wondered what, or who, had detained her at the theater. Jealousy rose in his throat, as bitter as bile, at the thought of her with another man—a mortal man.

His hands curled into tight fists as he watched her cross the street. More than anything, he wanted to go to her, to take her in his arms and hold her, for just a moment.

His eyes narrowed as he saw three dark shadows disengage themselves from a doorway and follow her into the parking lot.

He lost sight of her as she turned the corner, and then he heard her scream.

In an instant he was across the street, his hands closing around the throat of the thug nearest to him. The man's choked cry alerted his companions, and they whirled around to face him. One held a knife; the other a pistol.

Jason heard Leanne scream his name as the gunman fired three times in quick succession. Oblivious to the impact of the bullets, Jason lunged forward, a hand locking around the neck of each would-be assailant. Slowly, so slowly, his fingers tightened around their throats. He would have killed them, and gladly, if Leanne had not been there. The sound of her sobs penetrated the red mist that hovered in front of his eyes. With a muttered curse he let them go, and they fell in a tangled heap at his feet.

"Jason!" Leanne ran toward him, her eyes wide with fright.

"I'm all right." His gaze moved over her in a quick assessing glance. "Did they hurt you?"

"No." She stared at the bullet holes in his coat. Unable to believe her eyes, she touched each one with her fingertips, then looked up at him, her face as pale as the moon.

Hating himself because he had to deceive her, he fixed her with his hypnotic gaze, willing her to forget that the man had fired his gun, to remember only that he had come to her rescue. He left her spellbound while he went to his car, removed his coat, and replaced it with a sweater he'd left in the backseat.

Returning to her side, Jason snapped his fingers, releasing her from the power of his mind.

"Come," he said, taking the keys from her hand. "I'll drive you

home."

Leanne blinked up at him, then glanced at the three men sprawled on the ground. "What about them?"

"Leave them."

"Aren't you going to arrest them?"

"No, I'm going to get you home."

"But..."

"Very well. Let's go back to the theater. We can call from there."

Twenty minutes later a black-and-white pulled into the parking lot. After the three suspects were handcuffed and tucked into the backseat of the patrol car, Leanne gave the officers her name and address and then told them what had happened. Jason corroborated her story.

The police officer who took Jason's statement frowned as he examined the gun. "This weapon's been fired," he remarked, opening the chamber. "Three times."

"I don't remember any gunshots," Leanne said, looking from the police officer to Jason. "Do you?"

Jason shook his head. "No."

The cop scribbled something in his notebook, thanked Leanne for her time, advised her to be more careful in the future, and bid them good night.

"Now can I take you home?" Jason asked.

"I've never been so scared," Leanne whispered, and as the knowledge of what could have happened hit her, she began to tremble violently.

"It's over," Jason said, wrapping her in his arms. "Don't think about it."

"I can't help it. I know this kind of thing happens all the time, but I never thought it would happen to me."

Keeping one arm around her shoulders, he unlocked the car door and helped her inside, then went around to the driver's side.

Once he'd pulled out of the parking lot, he drew her up against him, holding her close while he drove.

"Where are we going?" Leanne asked as they turned onto the freeway.

"My place."

She didn't argue, merely rested her head on his shoulder and

closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, they were pulling into Jason's driveway.

She was still trembling when she got out of the car. "Nerves, I guess," she murmured, then gasped as Jason swung her into his arms and carried her up the stairs and into the house.

Inside, he placed her on the sofa, poured her a glass of wine, then went into the bathroom to fill the tub with hot water.

"You'll feel better after a bath," he said, taking the glass from her hand.

With a nod she went into the bathroom and shut the door. A good hot soak was just what she needed. Undressing, she sank into the tub, willing herself to relax, to forget the terror that had engulfed her. Reaching for the soap, she washed vigorously, knowing she'd never wash away the fear or the vile memory of being touched by an unwanted hand. Thank God for Jason, she mused, and never thought to question what he'd been doing there.

Jason stood in the living room, his keen hearing easily picking up the sounds Leanne made as she undressed and then stepped into the tub. It was so easy to picture her lying there, the water surrounding her, caressing her, as he so longed to do...

With an oath he threw the wine glass into the fireplace, feeling a sense of satisfaction as he watched the glass shatter, falling onto the stone hearth like crystal raindrops. If only he could destroy his need with such ease.

He prowled the room, his fists shoved into the pockets of his jeans, his desire clawing at him with each step. So easy, he thought, so easy to take her, to make her his, to bind her to him forever, body and soul.

The sound of the bathroom door opening echoed in his mind like thunder.

Leanne gasped as he whirled around to face her. The heat in his eyes seemed to engulf her so that she felt suddenly hot all over, as though she were standing in front of a blazing fire.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you." She smiled at him, wondering if she had imagined that heated look.

"Would you care for more wine?"

"No. I..."

"What is it?"

"I'm awfully tired. Would you mind if I went to bed?"

"Of course not, but you can't sleep in those clothes."

A faint flush brightened her cheeks. "I don't have anything else."

"I'll get you something."

He went into the bedroom, his gaze lingering on the bed. He'd lived in this house for twenty years, he mused, and no one had ever used the bed. It pleased him to think of Leanne lying there, her hair spread on the pillow, her scent permeating the sheets.

Going to the dresser, he drew out a long nightgown. He'd bought it because the color was the same vibrant green as her eyes; because, for one irrational moment, he had wanted to pretend he was an ordinary man buying a gift for the special lady in his life. He had bought it and put it away. Now, he held it in his hands, the silkiness of the material reminding him of Leanne's satin-smooth skin.

"Is that for me?" She had followed him into the bedroom.

"What do you think?"

"I thought..." She lifted her chin and took a deep breath. "When you stopped coming to the theater, I thought you might have found someone else."

He shook his head. "There will never be anyone else, Leanne."

"Then why? Why haven't you come to see me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No." He thrust the gown into her hands, then left the room, firmly closing the door behind him. He never should have brought her here.

He stood, in the living room in front of the fireplace, fighting the urge to go to her, to sweep her into his arms and satisfy the awful lust that was roaring through him, the lust to possess her, to drink and drink of her life-sustaining sweetness, and then give it back to her.

He clenched his hands into tight fists, wondering if he had the strength to continue seeing her and not possess her. He knew, at the very core of his being, that their joining would be everything he dreamed of, everything he yearned for.

It would be so easy to take her blood, to bind her to him for all eternity, and end the awful loneliness of his existence, but he recoiled at the very idea of condemning her to the kind of life he led. To do so would be the worst kind of betrayal.

Leanne had brought joy back into his life, had drawn him out of the depths of despair and given him a reason to rise in the evening. To condemn her to a life in the shadows would be the worst kind of cruelty.

He should send her away now, before it became impossible, but even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew he would not do it. Soon, he thought, soon he would send her away, but not now, when he had just found her. He hoped only that he was strong enough to keep his accursed lust at bay, that there was enough humanity left in him to let her go when the time came.

He felt his whole body tense as the bedroom door opened. Without looking, he knew she was standing there, watching him. He could feel her gaze on his back, feel her confusion.

"Jason?"

"Go to bed, Leanne." He had not meant the words to sound so harsh.

He sensed her hesitation, her hurt, and then, very quietly, she closed the door.

With a sigh he dropped into his favorite chair and buried his face in his hands, hands that trembled with the need to hold her close, to feel the warmth of her in his arms, to breathe in the scent of her hair and skin. She was so alive, so vibrant—just holding her made him feel a little alive himself.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there, staring into nothingness, when he heard her cry out.

Chapter Six

Bolting from the chair, Jason ran into the bedroom, ready to do battle with Satan himself if need be. But there was no one in the room except Leanne, tossing restlessly on the bed.

Her hair spread across the pillows like chocolate silk. She'd thrown the covers off, and the gown's full skirt pooled around her thighs, offering him a beguiling glimpse of shapely calves.

Another cry was torn from her throat, and he saw a tear slip

down her cheek.

Before he quite realized what he was doing, Jason was at her side, gathering her into his arms.

"Hush, love," he murmured. "It's only a dream, only a bad dream."

"Jason?"

"I'm here."

She burrowed her face into his shoulder. "It was awful," she said, her voice husky with sleep. "I was dreaming about tonight, but it was worse, much worse." She drew back, her gaze seeking his. "They shot you."

He shook his head. "No."

"Yes! I saw it so clearly. It couldn't have been a dream."

"But it was," he said reassuringly. "Look." He lifted his shirt so she could see his chest. "You see? No bullet holes."

"But I saw it, I heard the gunshots..."

He drew her head to his chest and rocked her gently. "Go back to sleep, Leanne. Everything's fine."

"Is it?" She rested her head against his chest and closed her eyes. "You feel so cold."

Unable to help himself, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head, willing her to relax, to sleep, to forget.

"I love you, Jason," she murmured drowsily. "Please don't leave me again."

He closed his eyes, her words pouring over him like hot August sunshine. She loved him.

It was a dream come true.

It was his worst nightmare.

"Promise me," she whispered. "Promise you'll never leave me."

Ah, Leanne, my love, if you only knew what you were asking of me. If you only knew how your nearness torments and tempts me.

She pulled back a little so she could see his face, her eyes searching his. "You don't love me, do you?"

He looked away, unable to bear the sight of the pain that shimmered in the depths of her eyes. Love her, he thought, if only he didn't!

A single tear slipped down her cheek. It was his undoing.

"I do love you, Leanne." The words were wrenched from the

depths of his soul. "Please, do not weep. I cannot bear the sight of your tears."

"You mean it?"

"I swear it by all that I hold dear."

"Oh, Jason!" She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, kissed him until they were both breathless.

She was fire and honey in his arms. All his senses came alive until he was drunk with the taste of her lips, the scent of her flesh, the sound of her whispered endearments. He felt his body grow hard. The need to nourish himself with the very essence of her life burned through him, as potent, as strong, as his desire for her flesh.

He groaned deep in his throat as her body molded itself to his. Her tongue laved the lobe of his ear, his neck; her hands explored the length and breadth of his back and shoulders, then boldly traced the outline of his thigh.

"Leanne." He caught her hands in his and willed his body to relax, knowing that in another moment his desire and his lust for blood would be impossible to control.

"It's all right," she said, her eyes shining with love and trust. "I want you to make love to me."

"I can't."

"Why?"

Why, why? What possible excuse could he give her? "I don't have any... any..." Hell's bells, what did they call those things, anyway?

"I don't care."

He summoned a tight smile. "I do."

"I don't have any diseases, Jason," she said quietly. "I've never been with a man before."

He felt his self-control hovering on the brink of collapse. "All the more reason why we should wait."

Maybe he was right, she thought, though she couldn't help being disappointed. Her mother had always taught her that good girls didn't "do it" until they were married. Her father, a wise and solemn man blessed with the gift of foresight, had warned her that, should she let herself be defiled before marriage, her life would be at great risk. When she had asked him to explain, he had taken her in his arms and told her that he'd had a most disturbing vision of her future, a vision in which he had seen her surrounded by

darkness and danger, protected only by her innocence, and then he had warned her that, should she give herself to the wrong man, she risked the chance of being forever cursed.

Thinking of that now, she was ashamed of her own weakness and doubly grateful for Jason's self-control.

"If I promise to behave, do you think you could stay with me until I fall asleep?"

With a nod he drew the covers up to her chin, then sat beside her, her hand cradled in his.

She smiled up at him and then, tucking his free hand under her cheek, she closed her eyes.

He sat with her until he felt the nearness of a new day and then, regretfully, he left the room.

In the kitchen he wrote her a note, saying he had been called to work early, and that he'd see her that night after the show. He invited her to stay the day if she liked, or to take his car if she wished to go home. He dropped the keys on top of the note, and then, his steps growing heavier by the moment, he made his way down to the basement.

He closed the door behind him, slipped the bolt into place, then wrapped himself in the quilt and closed his eyes.

* * *

Leanne woke with a smile on her face. Jason loved her. She stretched, feeling as contented as a cat. He loved her.

And she couldn't wait to see him. Bounding out of bed, she hurried out of the room. She expected to find him in the kitchen, and when he wasn't there, she checked the other bedroom. It, too, was empty.

Shrugging, she went back into the kitchen. She'd fix something to eat, shower, and then go home. It was then she saw the note.

She read it quickly and then, clutching the slip of paper in her hand, she glanced around the kitchen. She had hoped to cook breakfast for Jason. It would have been the first day they spent

together, and she wanted to share the morning with him before he went to work.

With an effort she shrugged off her disappointment. If she was going to be in love with a cop, this was the kind of thing she'd have to get used to. Policemen were on call twenty-four hours a day. They missed birthday parties, and Christmas morning, and anniversaries. They worked long hours for little pay. And these days, when law officers were being maligned and criticized more than ever, a cop needed the support of his loved ones.

Crossing the floor, she opened one of the cupboards. It was empty. So was the next one, and the next. Frowning, she opened the refrigerator. Nothing.

Leanne shook her head. She could understand if he never cooked, but she'd expected him to at least have coffee in the house, a loaf of bread, salt and pepper.

Puzzled, she went into the bedroom and opened the closet. It was reassuring, somehow, to see his clothes hanging there, to see several pairs of shoes and boots in a neat row on the floor.

After getting dressed, she wandered through the house again. There were no personal items to be found; no photos, no mementos. If not for his clothes and the hundreds of books in the den, she'd wonder if this were truly his house.

With a shake of her head she picked up his keys and left the house. He could answer her questions tonight; in the meantime, she had some shopping to do.

* * *

He felt her stirring in the house above. Even though he was trapped in the daylight sleep of death, he could feel her presence as she moved from room to room, feel her confusion when she realized there was nothing in the house to eat. He should have thought of that, but then, he hadn't planned to see her again, to bring her here again.

Leanne. Leanne. Her name whispered through the sluggishness

of his mind. He yearned to go to her, but his body, held prisoner by the daylight, refused to obey. Trapped in darkness, he willed the sun to hurry across the sky.

* * *

Leanne stood in the wings, peeking out at the audience during intermission. She felt her heart skip a beat when she found him. He was sitting in the fifth row, center section.

How handsome he was! His dark jacket complimented his hair; the pale blue shirt brought out the color of his eyes. Her gaze moved lovingly over his face, the width of his shoulders. He seemed to be in a world apart as he sat there. People milled around, waiting for the second act, laughing and talking, making their way to the front to look into the orchestra pit. She saw several girls talking to the bassoon player. He was a nice guy, funny and outgoing, and seemed to know everyone.

She took her place behind stage as the house lights dimmed and the second act began. Soon, soon she'd be with him.

Jason sat forward, lost in the Phantom's anguish as he told Christine she must make a choice between himself and Raoul.

And then Christine's voice, pure and beautiful, filled the auditorium, her words of pity melting the hatred in the Phantom's heart.

He felt the aching loneliness that engulfed the Phantom as he watched Christine leave with Raoul, and he wondered what Leanne would do if she knew the man she loved was truly a creature of darkness. Would she look at him with loathing, the love in her clear, green eyes turning to revulsion? Would she flee from his presence, disgusted by the memory of his kisses?

He had felt the lingering sense of her presence when he left the basement earlier that night. Her scent had filled the empty rooms of his house. Her presence had been everywhere. She had placed vases of fresh flowers in the living room and kitchen, there was food in the refrigerator, food that he couldn't eat, and a bar of perfumed soap in the bathroom. She'd left a change of clothes on

the bed in his bedroom, and a note that said she'd fix him a midnight snack after the show. He had found a rented video tape on top of the television.

A mirthless grin had curved his lips when he saw the title: *Dracula* starring Frank Langella. She seemed to have a fondness for vampire movies, he mused ruefully, and, though she didn't know it, for vampires, as well.

Now, sitting in the theater, listening to the applause that thundered through the auditorium as Davis Gaines received a standing ovation, Jason forced himself to admit that, just as the Phantom had let Christine go because he loved her, so he would have to let Leanne go. He could not hide his identity from her forever, and he did not trust himself to go on seeing her without hurting her, without turning her into a creature as wretched as himself.

Just one night, he thought. Let him have just one night to hold her and love her, and then he would let her go.

He lifted his gaze to the stage, focusing on her face as she stood in the background. Her eyes were bright, her lips parted in a smile that was his and his alone.

Just one night, he thought again, one night to last for eternity.

Heavyhearted, he left the theater and went to wait for her at the stage door.

Chapter Seven

Leanne ran up to him, bubbling with excitement. "Wasn't it great tonight?" she exclaimed. "Oh, I know, it's great *every* night, but sometimes it all seems so real, I forget it's just a play and find myself crying when the Phantom sends Christine away."

Jason nodded. He'd often felt that way himself.

Leanne threw her arms around Jason and kissed him. "Did you have a good day?"

"The same as always," Jason replied, and then, seeing the expectant look in her eyes, he smiled. "Thank you for the flowers

and everything."

"I hope you don't mind."

"No." He took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. "Let's go home."

Leanne hummed softly as they drove down the freeway, her hand resting on Jason's thigh, her gaze returning again and again to his profile. She loved the rugged masculine beauty of his face, the finely sculpted nose and lips, the strong square jaw, dark now with the shadow of a beard. His brows were thick and black above deep blue eyes, his cheekbones pronounced.

How had she fallen in love so quickly, so completely, with this man who was still a stranger in so many ways? She hardly knew him, and yet she felt as if she had always known him, as if her life had begun the night they met.

"Jason?"

He slid a glance in her direction. "What?"

"My folks would like to meet you."

The silence that followed her remark was absolute.

"Jason?"

"One day perhaps."

"How about next Sunday?"

"Leanne..."

"You don't want to, do you? Why not?"

"Surely you must have realized I'm a bit of a recluse when I'm not working."

"I know, but I'd really like them to meet you."

"I'll consider it."

"I'm sorry." She took her hand from his thigh, then looked out the window. "I didn't mean to push you, or make you think I was trying to..."

He muttered an oath as he pulled into the driveway and turned off the ignition. Getting out of the car, he opened the door for her, then drew her into his arms.

"I'm sorry, Leanne, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Please, just give me some time." *Just give me tonight.* "Come," he said, taking her hand. "I have a surprise for you."

Inside, he lit a dozen long blue tapers. "Sit down," he said, "I'll only be a moment."

With a nod Leanne sank down on the sofa. Kicking off her shoes, she stared at the candles flickering on the mantel.

A few minutes later, Jason returned. Kneeling in front of the fireplace, he lit a fire, and then he joined her on the sofa.

"Here," he said, handing her a long, slender box. "This is for you."

She opened the box with hands that trembled, and uttered a gasp of astonishment as she stared at the contents. "Oh, Jason, it's lovely."

"You like it, then?"

"Oh, yes." She ran her fingertip over the heavy gold chain, then outlined the filigreed heart-shaped locket. "But it must have cost a fortune."

"Only a small one." He lifted the chain from the box and fastened it around her neck. The heart-shaped locket settled in the cleft between her breasts. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it. And I love you."

Her gaze met his, filled with such adoration that it made him want to shout, to sing. To weep. "Leanne, beloved..." He cupped her cheek in his hand and kissed her gently.

"More," she whispered, and twining her arms around his neck, she kissed him passionately, her body pressing to his, inviting him to come closer.

Her nearness, the wanting he read in her eyes, made his pulse race with desire. Too fast, he thought, they were moving too fast. If he was to have only this one night, he wanted to savor every moment.

Leanne drew back, her eyes aglow. "Tell me," she whispered. "Tell me you love me."

"I love you."

"Have you loved many women?"

"No. Only one other."

"Who?"

"A girl from my childhood. She's dead now."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It happened a long time ago."

He gazed into her eyes, longing to bury his hands in the wealth of her hair, to carry her to bed, and sheathe himself in the velvet heat of her all the night long—but he dared not. He would make

love to her only once, just before dawn, and then he would let her go.

It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to keep from touching her. "Shall we watch your movie?"

"If you like. Have you seen it before?"

"No."

"You'll love it."

Jumping up, she slipped the tape into the VCR, then snuggled up against Jason, her head pillowed on his shoulder.

Langella made a most convincing vampire, Jason thought. Indeed, the movie hit close to home. Too close. He felt his desire for Leanne surge through him, along with a ravening thirst, as he watched Count Dracula seduce his lady love amidst a shimmering crimson backdrop while a bat hovered overhead.

A bat. He'd never changed into a bat in all his three hundred years; indeed, he didn't know if he could.

He felt his whole body tense as Dracula made a slit in his chest and offered Lucy a taste of his blood.

"I think he's the most realistic vampire I've ever seen," Leanne remarked. "I almost wish he didn't have to die in the end."

"Good always triumphs over evil, eventually," Jason remarked.

"I suppose, but he doesn't seem evil exactly," she mused. "I mean, I guess he can't help being what he is."

"No," Jason said, his voice strangely thick. "He can't."

"And he does seem to love her."

Jason gazed deeply into Leanne's eyes. "Yes, he does."

"I don't think I want to watch the end." She laughed self-consciously. "I've already seen one sad ending tonight."

"As you wish." Rising, Jason switched off the VCR. "Tell me, how does this Dracula meet his death?"

"On a ship. Doctor Van Helsing catches him on a big hook of some kind, and they hoist him into the sunlight." Leanne grimaced. "I think he ages and disintegrates, but I'm not really sure. I didn't watch that part. All I remember is seeing his black cape drifting away. It made me want to cry."

"You have a tender heart, my sweet."

"Enough about vampires and unhappy endings," Leanne murmured, reaching for him. "Make love to me, Jason."

"You're weeping," he exclaimed softly. "Why?"

"I don't know. I feel... I don't know, as if something awful is going to happen."

He knelt on the floor and drew her down into his arms. "Nothing is going to happen, Leanne. You're going to have a long and happy life filled with sunshine and laughter."

"I didn't know you told fortunes," she said with a watery smile.

"Only yours. You're going to marry and have children and live happily ever after."

"Am I?"

"I promise."

"And will you be the father of my children, Jason?"

"I'd like nothing better," he replied evasively, and then, to stop her from asking any more questions he couldn't answer, he kissed her.

The touch of his lips on hers, the sweet invasion of his tongue, drove all thought from Leanne's mind. She forgot her mother's admonition, forgot her father's dark warning; she could only feel. Jason's lips danced across her skin, hotter than the flames that burned in the hearth, engulfing her until she felt as though she, too, were on fire. Perhaps the heat incinerated her clothing, for she was suddenly lying naked beside him while his lips and tongue drifted over her face and neck, exploring the hollow of her throat, her navel, the valley between her breasts, the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

With a boldness she didn't know she possessed, she stripped him of his clothing, then let her hands wander over his hard-muscled flesh. He was a study in masculine perfection, from his broad shoulders and flat belly, to his long, powerful legs. She felt him shudder with pleasure at her touch, heard a low groan that sounded oddly like pain as she rained kisses along his neck and down his chest.

And then he was rising over her, his dark eyes blazing.

"Tell me to stop if you're not sure," he said, his voice low and rough. "Tell me to stop now, before it's too late."

"Don't stop." She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him closer. "Don't ever stop."

With a strangled cry he buried himself in her softness. She whimpered softly as he breached her maidenhead, and he cursed himself for hurting her, but it was too late now.

Too late to stop. Too late to think. He was caught up in an

inferno of desire, and there was no going back.

Leanne clutched at his shoulders, exhilarated by his mastery, frightened by the torrent of emotions that flooded through her. She felt as if she were drowning, being sucked into a vortex from which there was no return. A soft, gentle blackness engulfed her, and then she felt as if she were immersed in a warm red mist.

She moaned as she felt Jason moving deep within her. Her fingernails clawed at his back, drawing blood, and then she was reaching out, reaching for something that shimmered just beyond her grasp, something beautiful.

She cried as she found it, cried with the joy of discovery, of wonder, as her body convulsed beneath his.

For a long while they lay wrapped in each other's arms. She held him tighter when she felt him start to draw away. "Don't go."

"I must be heavy."

"You are, but I like it."

He shifted to the side a little so she wasn't bearing the full burden of his weight. "Did I hurt you?"

"No."

He drew back so he could see her face. How lovely she was, her beautiful green eyes still aglow with passion, her lips pink and swollen from his kisses, her hair spread in wild disarray over the pillow. He felt a ridiculous urge to thank her.

"What are you thinking?" Leanne asked. Reaching up, she brushed a lock of hair from his brow.

"How wonderful you are."

"Did I please you?"

"Foolish girl. No one has ever pleased me more."

"I wish you'd never known anyone but me."

He saw the hurt in her eyes, the sudden flare of jealousy, and silently berated himself because the thought of her being jealous pleased him beyond words.

He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "After tonight, beloved, there will never be anyone else."

"Truly?"

"Truly." Jason buried his face in her shoulder, knowing he had no wish to go on existing without her.

Three hundred years he'd walked the earth, he thought, and only now, as he contemplated a future without her, did he realize

the true meaning of loneliness.

Chapter Eight

He had promised himself he would make love to her only once, and then let her go. But he found it was a promise he could not keep.

Monster that he was, he could not keep from sampling her sweetness again and again, and each time he possessed her only increased his appetite for more.

Holding Leanne in his arms, he wished he could keep the sun from rising in the morning, wished her face, her beautiful green eyes filled with love, could be the last thing he saw before he slept, the first thing he saw upon rising.

He had made love to her as tenderly as ever a man loved a woman. Each moment he had spent in her arms had brought him the most exquisite pleasure he had ever known, and the most excruciating pain.

The lust to possess her wholly, as only a vampire could possess a woman, pulsed through him, and only the love he had for her made it possible to keep his accursed blood lust at bay, to touch the living warmth of her skin, to kiss and caress her, and not bury his fangs in her neck and alleviate the awful thirst that plagued him.

Still buried deep within her sweetness, he held her close, listening as her breathing returned to normal. She whispered that she loved him and then, her eyelids fluttering down, she fell asleep in his arms.

So young, he thought. So trusting.

He felt his fangs lengthen as he gazed at the pulse throbbing in the hollow of her throat.

One bite, just one. Slowly he bent over her, his tongue stroking her neck, tasting the musky heat of her skin, the salt of her perspiration.

A growl rumbled in his throat. His whole body shook as he

fought the need to dip his fangs into her flesh, to swallow a single drop of her blood. A single drop. She need never know that a monster had sipped her sweetness.

Hating himself for his weakness, he bent over her, his teeth gently pricking the tender skin in the side of her neck. Her blood was as warm and sweet as he'd imagined, and he hovered over her, torn by a driving need to take more, to stop fighting what he was and seize what he wanted. She was his for the taking; she would be his for all eternity...

She moaned softly as he bent over her once more, and then she whispered his name.

Filled with self-loathing for what he'd almost taken from her, he drew back, surprised to find that he was weeping.

"Sleep, Leanne," he whispered brokenly. "Dream your young girl's dreams. You're safe from the monster tonight."

* * *

Leanne dreamed of darkness, a vast, overpowering darkness. And in the darkness she saw a man with hair as black as ebony and eyes as blue as a midsummer sky. He was dressed all in black. A cloak the color of death billowed out behind him as he walked toward her, as graceful as a panther stalking its prey, but it was his gaze that captured her, mesmerizing, haunting, filled with the pain and suffering of three hundred years.

She should have been afraid of him, afraid of the power in his eyes. Instead, she reached out toward him. *Let me help you.*

He shook his head, and she saw that he was weeping, and his tears were the color of blood. *No one can help me*, he said, and the anguish in his voice was more than she could bear.

I'll do anything, she promised. *Anything you ask, only let me ease your sorrow.*

Anything? he asked.

Anything, she replied, and then he was upon her, wrapping her in the folds of his cloak. His dark eyes blazed with an unholy light

as he lowered his head toward her. She closed her eyes as she felt his mouth cover hers in, a searing kiss, and then she felt his teeth at her neck, a sharp pain, a sudden sense of lethargy.

A scream rose in her throat, a scream that brought her awake with a start.

Heart pounding in her breast, she sat up, reaching for Jason, only to find herself alone in the bed. She gazed wildly around the room, but he was nowhere in sight. Through a crack in the drapes, she saw that it was dawn.

She sat there for a long moment, and then, with a hand that trembled, she touched the side of her neck. Was she imagining things, or did she really feel two small puncture wounds? Slipping out of bed, she started for the bathroom, only to stop when she remembered there was no mirror in the bathroom.

There were no mirrors anywhere in the house.

She shook her head vigorously, refusing to even consider the bizarre possibility that came to mind as she climbed back into bed and drew the covers up to her chin.

She was just letting her imagination run wild.

"Just a dream." She spoke the words aloud as she closed her eyes. "Just a dream."

Leanne stared at her reflection in her bedroom mirror, but all she saw were the two small puncture wounds in her neck. For the fifth time in as many minutes, she touched her fingertips to the tiny holes. As before, heat seemed to flow from the wounds and Jason's image danced before her eyes.

She had looked at those marks in the rearview mirror time and again as she drove home. Looked at them and shuddered. Looked at them and tried to find a logical reason for their existence.

Now, still staring into the bedroom mirror, she tried to laugh at the ridiculous image of Jason bending over her, his teeth turning into fangs, biting her neck. She'd been watching too many vampire movies, she thought, had read too many books by Anne Rice and Lori Herter. She was losing her grip on reality. The marks on her neck were probably nothing more menacing than a couple of mosquito bites.

Leaving the bedroom, she went into the kitchen, grabbed a dust rag and began dusting the living room furniture. Her apartment had been sadly neglected since she met Jason Blackthorne...

Jason. He'd been gone when she woke up. A note told her he'd been called to court to testify in a case, but that he'd meet her that night after the show.

She'd never seen him during the day.

She thrust the thought away, plugged in the vacuum, and ran it over the living-room rug.

She put the vacuum away, then changed the sheets on her bed and bundled up her laundry. Carrying it downstairs, she stuffed it into one of the machines, then went back upstairs to fix lunch.

She'd never seen him eat.

Sitting at the table, she cradled her head in her hands. It couldn't be. For all her talk to the contrary, in her heart she didn't really believe in vampires. There had to be a logical explanation for the oddities in his life.

There had to be.

She wondered if he was still in court, and then, because she couldn't wait until after the show to see him, she grabbed her car keys and drove to his house, her laundry forgotten.

She'd left his key under a flowerpot on the front porch. A sudden unease filled her as she unlocked the massive front door. Without thinking, she dropped the heavy brass key into the pocket of her jeans, then stepped into the entry hall. She'd never before noticed how still the house was.

"Jason?"

She tossed her car keys on the small table inside the front door and walked through the house, seeing it all again as if for the first time. The rooms were all dark, the sunlight held at bay by the heavy drapes that covered all the windows. She explored every room, every closet, looking for the door that led to the room where Jason slept during the day.

She shuddered at the thought of seeing him lying in a silk-lined casket, sleeping the dreamless sleep of the undead during the hours of daylight. Unbidden, unwanted, came a rush of images as she recalled every vampire book she had ever read, every horror movie she had ever seen. All had vividly portrayed vampires as the embodiment of evil, preying on unsuspecting mortals. She felt a rush of nausea as she imagined Jason stalking some helpless woman, sinking his fangs into her neck...

She pressed her fingers to the marks in her own neck, shuddering as she imagined Jason biting her, drawing her blood.

With an effort she shook the image from her mind. In the den, she paused before one of the paintings signed J. Blackthorne. Jason had told her an ancestor had painted it. She ran her fingers over the distinctive signature, and then she went into the kitchen and picked up the note Jason had left her that morning.

Returning to the den, she compared the handwriting on the note to the signature on the painting. They were the same.

With growing certainty she continued her search. There was a service porch off the kitchen—and a door—a locked door. She stared at it for a long moment, and then she placed her hand against the wood and knew, without doubt, that Jason was behind the door.

Getting a chair from the kitchen, she sat down to wait.

* * *

He felt her presence in the house as soon as he awoke. He'd been aware of her nearness all day, aware of the turmoil in her mind. He knew he could use the power of his mind to put her at ease, to make her forget the questions and suspicions that troubled her. But he could not do such a thing. She deserved the truth, and he would give it to her.

He shrugged the quilt off his shoulders and stood up. His feet felt weighted with lead as he climbed the narrow stairway and unlocked the door.

She would know the truth the minute she saw his face.

Leanne's heart climbed into her throat as she watched the doorknob turn and the door swing open.

"Jason."

A faintly mocking grin touched his lips as he met her gaze. "Sorry to keep you waiting so long."

"You know I was here?"

"Of course."

She glanced past him to the darkness beyond the doorway.

"What's... what's down there?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"You don't believe me?" He flicked on a light switch. "Perhaps you'd care to see for yourself?"

The thought of going down those stairs filled her with dread, but she had to know, had to see for herself.

Summoning every ounce of courage she possessed, she stepped past Jason and walked slowly down the stairs, wondering, as she did so, if she was making the biggest mistake of her life. What if he followed her? If he was truly a vampire, he wouldn't want anyone to know where he rested during the day.

She paused at the foot of the stairs and looked around, but there was nothing to see, only a patchwork quilt.

And a small mound of earth. She swallowed hard. Wasn't there some kind of vampire edict that made it mandatory for the undead to rest on the soil of their native homeland?

"What were you doing down there so long?" she asked when she returned to the laundry room.

"Sleeping."

There was no emotion in his voice, no inflection of any kind; it was merely a simple statement of fact.

"I thought..."

"You thought to find a coffin." He gave a slight shrug. "I tried sleeping in one once, but I found it..." He paused a moment. "Distasteful."

"How long have you been... been a...?"

"Three hundred years."

It couldn't be true. She glanced around, thinking how bizarre it was to be having such an outlandish conversation in a laundry room. And even as she tried to tell herself she must be dreaming, she knew that everything she had feared was true. She felt it in her heart, saw the truth of it in his eyes.

For the first time, she noticed how pale he was. His skin was drawn tight over the planes of his face, and there was a burning intensity in his eyes as he stared at her throat.

Unconsciously, she lifted a hand to her neck. "How could you keep such a secret?"

"How could I tell you?"

"But... we made love..." She stared at him, the horror of what she'd done making her sick inside. She'd made love to a man who was a ghoul.

The revulsion in her eyes sliced through him, and he cursed the hand of fate that had turned him into a monster, cursed the hunger that clawed at him even now, urging him to drink from her one more time.

For a moment Jason closed his eyes. Her nearness, her goodness, reached out to him. She shouldn't be here, not now, not when the desire to feed pounded relentlessly through him. The remembered taste of her blood on his lips, warm and sweet, drew a groan from deep in his throat.

She was close, too close. Needing to put some distance between them, he went into the living room. Standing in front of the fireplace, Jason braced one arm on the mantel and stared at the ashes in the hearth. A blink of his eye brought the cold embers to life.

A sigh rose from deep within him. She knew what he was now, knew where he rested during the day, something no mortal but Jolene had ever known before. With that knowledge she held the power to destroy him... but it didn't matter. Losing her would destroy him as nothing else could.

She followed him into the parlor, as he'd known she would, though she stayed on the far side of the room. Foolish girl, he thought, didn't she realize the danger she was in?

Leanne rubbed her fingertips over the two small wounds in her neck. "You did this, didn't you?"

"Yes."

A look of horror filled her eyes. "Am I...?"

"No!" He shoved his hands into his pants pockets, his fists clenching and unclenching as he fought to control the thirst raging through him. "I may be a fiend of the worst kind, but I would never condemn you to a life of darkness."

She touched the wounds in her neck again. "Then why?"

"Last night was to be our last night together." He met her gaze, begging for her understanding, her forgiveness. "I wanted to taste your sweetness just once."

Leanne stared up at him, the thought of never seeing him again suddenly more frightening than the realization that he was, indeed, a vampire.

"Our last night?" she repeated tremulously.

"Yes."

His gaze lingered on the pulse throbbing in her throat for a moment before returning to her face. "You'd better go now."

Wordlessly, she continued to stare at him, her eyes filled with anguish and denial.

With preternatural speed he crossed the floor until he was standing in front of her, his eyes blazing with an unholy light.

"Go home, Leanne," he said, his voice harsh and uneven as he fought to control his raging thirst. "You're not safe here."

"Jason..."

A low growl rose in his throat as he bared his fangs. "Go home," he said again, and his voice was filled with pain and tightly leashed fury.

With a strangled cry she turned and ran out of the room.

Out of his life.

Chapter Nine

He sat in his favorite chair in front of the fireplace in the den, staring, unseeing, at the flames. In his mind's eye, he saw the horror in Leanne's eyes when she thought he might have bequeathed her the Dark Gift and turned her into a loathsome creature such as himself. The sound of her footsteps running away, running away from what he was, echoed like a death knell in his ears.

He stared at his hands. He hadn't eaten for several days, and his skin looked like old parchment. He knew his eyes glowed with hell's own fury, knew that soon he would either have to go to ground and lose himself in sleep, or satisfy the awful craving that was eating him up inside.

An unquenchable thirst for blood.

A deep and never-ending hunger for Leanne.

Had it been only two weeks since he'd held her in his arms, tasted her sweetness, heard the sound of her laughter? Only two

weeks?

It seemed a lifetime.

A lifetime, Jason mused with a bitter smile. He had walked the earth for three hundred years, and never had the hours and the minutes passed so slowly.

During the long, lonely hours of the night, as he prowled the alleys and dark streets of the city, he seemed to hear the wind taunting him with the sound of her name. Sometimes he paused outside a house, listening to the sounds of life inside: children crying, laughing. He watched people eating, talking, arguing, sleeping. And he thought of Leanne, always Leanne, of how wonderful it would be to be mortal, to share her life, to sit across the breakfast table from her in the morning, to make love to her in the light of day, to father a child.

He haunted the shadows outside the Ahmanson, torturing himself with glimpses of her face. He read the sadness in her eyes, and he was filled with bitter regret because he knew he was the cause of her sorrow. She didn't smile anymore, and the world was the poorer because of it.

One night, driven by an uncontrollable urge to hear her voice, he bought a ticket to the evening performance, sitting in the last row of the balcony so there would be no chance of her discovering he was there.

Oblivious to everything else, he sat with his gaze riveted on her face, silent tears streaming down his cheeks as he listened to her sing. Her voice, while still beautiful, lacked the enthusiasm, the *joie de vivre*, that had once set it apart from the others.

Leaving the theater that night, he had told himself she'd get over him. She was young, so young, and they had spent such a short time together. Soon she'd find someone else...

Now, staring into the fire's dying embers, he gripped the arms of the chair, his nails gouging the wood as he thought of her in the arms of another man.

Rising, he went into the bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he picked up the pillow she had used. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, his nostrils filling with her scent. In his mind, he saw her as she had been the night they made love, her beautiful body lightly sheened with perspiration, her green eyes glowing and alive. He felt again the touch of her hands as she undressed him, felt the way her fingers trembled as she caressed him, bold yet innocent. He relived every moment, every touch, embracing

the pain of remembering, the shattering sense of loss now that she was gone.

Into his mind came the last soulful cry of the Phantom as he stood alone in his underground lair, bidding farewell to the only woman he would ever love.

The urge to kill, to destroy, welled within him, growing until he could think of nothing else.

Engulfed with rage, he stalked out of the bedroom, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. With a strangled cry he grabbed the fireplace poker, holding it so tightly it bent in his hands as though it were made of straw.

With an oath he flung it against the wall, then stormed out of the house, the lust for blood, the need to hurt someone as he was hurting, driving him beyond all reason.

He found his prey in a dark alley. The man struggled in vain, his red-rimmed eyes growing wide as he stared into the face of death. With a low growl Jason lowered his head to the man's throat. He smelled the malodorous stench of the drunk's unwashed body, felt the violent tremors that wracked the man as he realized he was about to die.

Unaccountably, an image of Leanne rose in Jason's mind, and he saw himself as she would see him, his eyes glittering with the lust for blood, his lips drawn back to expose his fangs as he prepared to drain this hapless creature of its life.

Filled with self-loathing, Jason shoved the man away and disappeared into the shadows of the night.

* * *

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Leanne glanced up, meeting Jennifer's face in the mirror. As always, Jennifer looked as if she'd just stepped out of a fashion magazine. Her makeup was perfect. Her long, honey blond hair framed her face like a golden halo. Unlike the rest of the cast, who usually arrived at the theater in jeans and a T-shirt, Jennifer always

looked as if she were about to go to a Hollywood premiere. "Look like a star, be a star," she always said.

Leanne forced a smile. "Talk about what?"

"Whatever's been bothering you for the past two weeks."

"I don't know what you mean," Leanne said and burst into tears.

Jennifer sat down on the stool beside Leanne and patted her friend's shoulder.

"It has to be man trouble," she murmured with the air of one who spoke from experience.

"Oh, Jen, you don't know the half of it."

"I've got time to listen."

Leanne plucked a Kleenex from the box on the dressing table and dabbed at her eyes. If only she *could* tell someone, she thought sadly, if only she could pour it all out, all the heartache, the hurt. If only...

"There's nothing to tell, Jen. I met a... a man, and I thought... it doesn't matter. It's over."

"But you don't want it to be over?"

"No."

"Maybe he'll change his mind."

A rueful smile tugged at Leanne's lips. It wasn't Jason's mind that was keeping them apart. "Maybe."

"Come on," Jennifer said, gaining her feet. "Let's go get a cup of coffee."

It was unusually crowded backstage that night. Some of the cast members were giving friends and family a behind-the-scenes tour, showing them the props: the huge painted elephant that was part of the first act, the boat that ferried Christine and the Phantom across the underground lake, the numerous candelabra that lit the Phantom's lair, the enormous winding staircase, the trap door that the Phantom used during the Masquerade number. Later, they'd see Twin's Gym, where members of the cast and crew sometimes worked out between shows.

Near the stage door, Leanne saw Michael Piontek, who played the Vicomte de Chagny, signing autographs, and Dale Kristen, who had played the part of Christine Dane for over four years, a role Leanne secretly yearned to play.

When they reached the street, she couldn't help glancing at the

corner where she had first seen Jason. There was no one there now, and she experienced anew the pain of their separation, the awful sense of loss that had filled her heart since the night she ran out of his house.

She blinked back the tears that threatened to fall.

"Where shall we go?" Jennifer asked.

"I'm not up to it, Jen," Leanne said. "I think I'll just go home."

"Leanne..."

"Please, Jen. I need to be alone."

Jennifer laid her hand on Leanne's arm. "All right, honey, but you call me if it gets too bad, promise?"

"I promise. And thanks, Jen."

"See you Tuesday."

Leanne groaned softly. Tomorrow was Monday, and the theater was dark. What would she do all day, all night, with not even a performance to help fill the lonely hours?

Shoulders sagging, she crossed the street to her car. All the magic had gone out of the play; all the joy had gone out of singing. Jason was gone from her life, and he'd taken her heart and soul with him.

Sliding behind the wheel, she drove out of the parking lot and turned down Hope Street toward the freeway.

At home she kicked off her shoes and sank down on the sofa. For a time she stared at nothing and then, because the silence was too much for her, she switched on the TV.

It took a moment for the black-and-white images to register on her mind, and then she didn't know whether to laugh or cry, for there, clad in funereal black clothes and cape, was Bela Lugosi in his most famous role, that of Count Dracula.

The tears came then, burning her eyes, making her throat ache. She sobbed uncontrollably, wishing that she'd never gone to Jason's house that day, wishing she could have gone on loving him in blissful ignorance.

For a moment she considered going to Jason, begging him to do whatever was necessary to change her into what he was, but she knew she lacked the courage to face the enormity, the horror, of such a vile transformation. She didn't want to live forever if it meant she would never be able to see the sun again, never be able to jog along the beach on a bright summer day, never experience the joy and wonder of motherhood.

But she didn't want to live without Jason.

Tears washed down her cheeks as she watched Dracula, but it was Jason she saw walking down the long stone stairway, a candle in his hand; Jason enveloping Mina in his cloak. How many people had he killed in the last three hundred years? In the last two weeks? Or perhaps he no longer had to kill. She remembered watching *Love at First Bite* and wondered if Jason visited the local blood bank to satisfy his thirst.

A burst of hysterical laughter bubbled to her lips. She must be going insane, she thought, comparing the reality of what Jason was to Hollywood's celluloid illusions.

Jason, Jason. Why couldn't she forget him? Why didn't she hate him? But she couldn't think of him as an evil monster, not when she remembered how tenderly he had made love to her.

Sniffing back her tears, she thought of all the hours they had spent together. Never had he done anything to hurt her, never had he treated her with anything but kindness and affection.

She lifted her hand to her neck. The tiny wounds had all but disappeared. She recalled asking him why he had bitten her, remembered the sadness in his eyes when he told her that night was to have been their last. She knew now that he had planned to leave her because he was afraid for her, afraid of what he might do.

I wanted to taste your sweetness just once.

Burying her face in her hands, she sobbed, "Jason, help me. Please help me."

* * *

He paused in his headlong flight to nowhere as Leanne's soulful cry echoed in his ears. He felt her pain as if it were his own, felt her unhappiness, her anguish of spirit.

Closing his eyes, he pressed his forehead against the cool stone wall that ran along the alley.

Ah, Leanne, beloved, he thought, If it gives you any solace, be

assured that your pain is no greater than mine.

Leanne. The need to see her burned strong and bright within him, and before he quite realized what he was doing, he found himself at her door.

He hesitated for the space of a heartbeat, and then he placed his hand on the latch. It was locked, but nothing as insignificant as a locked door could keep him from his heart's desire.

A wave of his hand and the door swung open. Quiet as a shadow, he entered the apartment and closed the door behind him.

She was in the front room. Her life force drew him as surely as a beacon.

On silent feet he followed her scent.

She was curled up in the corner of a high-backed sofa, her head pillowed on her arms, her cheeks wet with tears.

He watched her for a long moment, and then, unable to help himself, he crossed the room and knelt on the floor in front of the sofa.

"Leanne."

Her eyelids fluttered open, and his breath caught in his throat as he waited—waited to see the horror and the loathing that would be reflected in her eyes when she saw his face.

"Jason?" She reached out to him, her hand trembling. "Tell me you're really here, that I'm not dreaming."

"I'm here if you want me to be."

"I do. Oh, I do!"

Sitting up, she threw her arms around his neck and held him tight.

With a strangled sob he drew her down into his arms and buried his face in her hair. For a long while they simply sat there holding each other close.

Leanne felt the sting of tears behind her eyes. He was here, really here. It didn't matter how or why or for how long, only that he was there, holding her as if he would never let her go.

"I've missed you." She whispered the words, afraid to break the spell between them.

"No more than I've missed you."

"Truly?"

"Truly." He drew back so he could see her face. "I've felt your sadness these past two weeks. I know how unhappy you've been."

He brushed her cheek with his knuckles. "I can help you, if you'll let me."

"What do you mean?"

He took a deep breath. "I can make you forget we ever met."

Her eyes grew wide and then narrowed. "You mean hypnotize me?"

He nodded. "I've done it before."

"When?"

"Do you remember the night those three men attacked you in the parking lot?"

"Of course."

"One of them had a gun. He shot me three times."

Leanne shook her head. "That's impossible."

"You saw it all. If I hadn't erased the memory from your mind, you would have started asking questions I couldn't answer." A faint smile curved his lips. "I can show you the bullet holes in my coat if you don't believe me."

She didn't want to believe him, but she knew somehow that it was true.

"Do you want me to make you forget that we ever met?"

He would do it if she asked, he thought bleakly, though destroying her memory of their time together would be like destroying a part of himself. And yet, he would do anything she asked, anything that would wipe the sadness from her eyes.

Slowly, Leanne shook her head. "No, I don't want to forget a single moment. I want... I want us to go on as before."

"Leanne, you don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do."

Jason shook his head. "No, beloved."

"You don't want me?"

"You know that's not true."

"Then why?"

"Leanne, you think you know what I am, but you don't. There's nothing romantic about being a vampire. It's a life against nature, a life against God. I could never forgive myself if I caused you harm."

"You won't. I know you won't."

"You don't know!" He pushed her away and stood up. "I never

should have come here."

"Why did you?"

"Because I needed to see you one last time. Because I heard you call me and I couldn't stay away."

Rising, she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against his chest. "I love you, Jason. I couldn't bear it if you left me again."

"Leanne, you don't know how hard it is for me to hold you like this and not make you mine. You don't know how many nights I've wanted to take you in my arms and drain you of every drop of life."

His gaze seemed to probe the furthest reaches of her heart and soul. "How will you feel about me if one night I can't control what I am?"

His words gave her pause. He saw it in her eyes, heard it in the sudden sharp intake of her breath.

"I never should have come here," he said again. "I'm sorry."

"Don't go, please. Stay the night with me. Just one more night."

"Leanne..."

"Please?"

He knew he should leave her, now, before it was too late, but when he opened his mouth to tell her he couldn't stay, the words wouldn't come. Instead, he bent his head and kissed her, kissed her with all the bittersweet longing that had tormented him for the past two weeks.

And when the kiss ended, she took him by the hand and led him into her bedroom.

He saw it all in a quick glance: the dresser and nightstand made of burnished oak, the large oval mirror that reflected her image, but not his, the double bed covered with a colorful cotton throw.

Leanne stood in the middle of the room, her heart pounding wildly in her breast as she waited for Jason to take her in his arms.

Instead, he pressed a kiss to her cheek, and when he looked at her, his eyes were filled with doubts. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, and then she reached under his shirt, letting her fingers slide up and down the length of his back. His skin was firm and cool beneath her hand.

With a suddenness that startled her, he swung her into his arms and covered her mouth with his, kissing her until she was

breathless, weightless, aware of nothing in all the world but the iron-hard arms that held her. His face blocked everything else from her vision, and she stared up into his eyes, eyes that burned with a bright blue flame.

"Jason." She whispered his name, just his name, but it conveyed all the loneliness she'd felt during their separation, her anguish at the thought of never seeing him again, the deep void his absence had left in her life.

"I know," he said, his voice thick with unshed tears. "I know."

Gently, he placed her on the bed, his hands moving over her face, lightly tracing the outline of her lips, her brows, the delicate curve of her cheek.

"Leanne, beloved..."

He bent to kiss her again, and yet again, knowing he could never get enough of her, knowing that, if he existed for another three hundred years, he would never love like this again.

Leanne stroked his brow. It was so good to touch him again, to know that he still cared. Their separation had not been easy for him, either, she thought. There was a dark, haunted look in his eyes that had not been there before, a pain so deep it made her want to weep.

"Jason, let us go on as before."

His expression mirrored his surprise. "You can't mean that?"

"I do. I don't care that you're a..."

"You say you don't care," he remarked quietly, "yet you can't even say the word."

"Vampire. Vampire! I don't care what you are, only say you won't leave me, that you'll be a part of my life again."

"What kind of life can you have with me?" he asked in a voice filled with self-loathing. "How long will you be content with a man—a monster—who can never share the daylight with you, who can come to you only at night, who sometimes feeds on the living because he can't resist the urge to kill, because he can't always control his fiendish hunger, his rage?"

"I'll help you," she replied fervently. "I'll love you so completely you won't have to be angry anymore. And if you need to take someone's blood, you can take mine."

He gazed into the depths of her eyes, eyes filled with trust and hope, and for a moment he let himself believe that such a life was possible.

Knowing it was wrong, knowing that to touch her now would only bring them both pain later on, he kissed her.

Kissed her because he loved her so much, wanted her so much, needed her so desperately.

He began to undress her then, his hands moving reverently over her body as he reacquainted himself with the gentle contours of her body, the softness of her skin.

He closed his eyes, his joy so fierce it was almost agony, as she rid him of his clothes. She explored his hard-muscled body freely, letting her fingertips glide over the width of his shoulders, down his flat belly, the length of his thighs.

His response to her touch was instant, bringing a smile to her lips and a warm glow of pleasure to her eyes. He groaned softly as he drew her up against him, the lush curves of her body filling the emptiness in his.

His mouth covered hers again in a long, hungry kiss, and he knew if he held her and kissed her for the rest of his life, it wouldn't be enough.

Trembling with the need to merge his flesh with hers, he rose over her, wondering what miracle had brought her into his life. Surely, he had done nothing to deserve her love, her trust. He was a creature of the night, a man who had been cursed, but now felt blessed beyond belief.

Her arms wrapped around him as she lifted her hips in welcome invitation, taking him deep within herself, cherishing him, loving him, until he wanted to weep with the wonder of it. She whispered that she adored him, and her words fell on his heart like sunshine, chasing the darkness from his soul, filling him with warmth and light, making him forget, for a moment, that he was more monster than man.

He held her tight as her body convulsed beneath him, felt his self-control begin to slip as he watched the pulse that throbbed in her throat. A red mist veiled his eyes, reminding him that he wasn't a man, but a monster masquerading in human form, a fiend who had no right to love this woman.

He gazed into her eyes, eyes so like Jolene's, and into his memory came an image of his wife, her beauty fading, her health deteriorating, as time and disease ravaged her face and body while he stayed forever young. He could not endure the agony of watching Leanne grow old, could not bear the thought that she would die and leave him alone.

Neither could he bear the thought of being parted from her again, and yet he knew that, if he stayed, it would be only a matter of time before he succumbed to the awful craving for her blood, a need that even now was raging through him, as hot and fierce as his desire for her flesh.

As surely as he knew he must shun the sunlight or perish, he knew that he would force the Dark Gift on Leanne rather than watch her die. And he knew, just as surely, that she would hate him for it forever.

Painful as it would be, it would be better to leave her now, before he did something they would both regret, before her love turned to loathing.

He held her close, listening to the soft sound of her breathing as she fell asleep in his arms.

He had always feared dying, feared the prospect of an eternity, writhing in the flames of hell, but he feared it no longer.

Hell was not a place awaiting his soul, he thought in despair. Hell would be waiting for him when he kissed her good-bye.

He held her until the last moment, until he could feel the sunrise trembling on the brink of the horizon, feel the promised heat of it.

She murmured sleepily as he drew the covers over her, then bent and kissed her one last time.

And still he lingered, imprinting her image on his mind that he might carry it with him through all the endless days and nights of eternity.

Tomorrow night he would leave Los Angeles. It was the only way to keep from seeing her—the only way to keep her safe.

Chapter Ten

He had left her again. There was no note this time, no written words of farewell.

With grim certainty she knew he would never come back.

With equal certainty she knew she would not let him go.

It was Monday, and there were no performances scheduled. She straightened her apartment, wrote Jennifer a short letter that would account for her absence but explained nothing. Next, she penned a letter to her parents, telling them she loved them, saying she'd met a man and they were on their way to Europe for an extended holiday.

She took a long, hot bubble bath, shaved her legs, washed her hair, and then she stood in front of the full-length mirror that hung on the back of the bathroom door, studying her face and figure, knowing that, if her plans went as intended, she'd never see her face again—wondering, in a distant part of her mind, how a woman applied lipstick and mascara without the benefit of a looking glass.

Before she could lose her courage, she ran down the stairs to the garage, got into her car, and drove toward Jason's house.

She lingered on the porch, watching the sun go down in a blaze of color, imprinting the image on her mind.

And then, resolutely, she turned her back on the myriad colors splashed across the sky. Taking a deep breath, she took the heavy brass key from her pocket and opened the front door.

The inside of the house was as still as death.

Her footsteps made no sound as she made her way to the service porch, but she was sure the thudding of her heart could be heard as far away as Catalina.

As she'd done once before, she sat down and waited for him to rise, wondering, as she did so, if there was some kind of vampire law that would prohibit them from sleeping in a bed.

She felt her heartbeat increase as the basement door swung open, and then she forgot everything else but her love for Jason, and her reason for being there.

So, he thought, he had not imagined her presence, after all.

"Leanne," he said after a lengthy silence. "Why are you here?"

"You know why." She tilted her head back, baring her throat to his gaze. "Do it, Jason, do it now."

"No!" He turned away from her, his hands knotted into fists. He recoiled as if in pain when he felt her hand caress his back.

"I love you, Jason. If you can't, or won't, try to live in my world, then I'll live in yours."

"No. No. No!" He whirled around, his eyes blazing. "How can

you even consider it?"

"Because I want to be with you!" She placed her hands on his chest and gazed up at him, her eyes filled with love. "I love you. I don't want to live without you."

He drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, and then he took her hands in his.

"Look at me, Leanne," he said quietly. "Take a good look. Tell me what you see."

"I see the man I love, the man I've waited for my whole life."

"No. I'm not a man, and I can't pretend to be one any longer, not even for you."

He saw the protest rise in her eyes, and he silenced her with a look. "Face it, beloved. I'm a ghoul, a monster."

"No."

He lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed her palms, first one, then the other. "Go home, Leanne."

"I won't leave you, Jason. Nothing you can say will make me change my mind."

It was tempting, so tempting. He closed his eyes as he contemplated the ecstasy of bestowing the Dark Gift on her, of knowing that, as a creature of the night, she would be his forever. Never again would he be alone, his existence empty. She would bring him the sunlight he had not seen in three hundred years. He would know love and laughter, the taste of her kisses, the sound of her voice. They could travel the earth together. He could show her the wonders of the ancient world, take her to London, to Paris, to Rome. And perhaps, if he loved her enough, she'd never miss the sunlight, never regret forfeiting the opportunity to bear children...

He held the image close, savoring it, even though he knew he would not do it. Every day of his miserable existence, he had cursed Marguerite for what she'd done, for the mortal life she had stolen from him. He would not selfishly bequeath the same horrible fate to the woman he loved.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, drinking in the sight of her beloved face, knowing that, after this night, he would never see her again.

"I love you, Jason." She spoke the words with the simple faith of a child, as if they could make everything all right...

"And I love you," he replied fervently.

"And you'll stay with me forever?"

Tenderly, he brushed his knuckles over her cheek. "Only death

will part us, beloved."

At his words Leanne shivered violently, as if someone had filled her veins with ice water. She knew then what he meant to do, knew it as surely as she knew the sun would rise in the morning.

"No!"

"Yesterday, you asked me for one last night. Now I ask the same of you."

"Jason, you can't mean to do it."

"You cannot stop me."

"I will not live without you!" She pummeled his chest with her fists. "Do you hear me, Jason Blackthorne, I will not live without you! If you kill yourself, you'll be killing me, too."

She looked up at him, her eyes awash with pain, though only a single tear trickled down her cheek.

He watched it for a moment, and then, compelled by an urge he could neither understand nor deny, he bent down and licked the tiny drop of moisture from her cheek.

For a moment he gazed into her eyes, and then he reeled back, his whole body on fire.

"Jason, what is it?"

He couldn't answer; he could only stare at her, the salty taste of that single tear incinerating his tongue, burning through every fiber of his being like a shaft of liquid sunlight.

He heard her voice sobbing his name as from a great distance, but he lacked the power to answer. He dropped to his hands and knees, his head hanging, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

"Go." He forced the word between clenched teeth.

"No, I won't leave you." She knelt beside him and placed her hand on his shoulder, only to jerk it away when the heat radiating from his flesh burned her palm. "What is it? What's happening?"

"Go!" With an effort he raised his head and met her gaze. "I'm dying."

She shook her head, her eyes filled with denial. "That's impossible."

"It's true." He groaned low in his throat as his body convulsed with agony. His blood was on fire; his skin seemed to be shrinking, melting. "Leave me." He took a deep shuddering breath. "Please, Leanne, if you love me, go from here."

She was sobbing now, her tears falling to the floor, splashing like liquid fire over his hands.

"Please, leave me," he implored her. "I don't want you to see..."

Using the chair for support, she stood up. If he wanted her to go, she would go, but only as far as the other room.

"I love you," she whispered brokenly. "I'll always love you."

But he was past hearing.

Chapter Eleven

Numb, she stared down at him, unable to believe he was dead. A distant part of her mind, a morbid part she hadn't even known existed, wondered why his body hadn't aged and dissolved into dust.

And then reality struck home. Jason was dead.

Slowly, she dropped to her knees beside him and cradled his head in her lap, the pain in her heart too deep for tears.

Gently, she smoothed the long dark hair from his brow. His skin felt warm and alive. Odd, she thought, when it had always felt cool before.

The hours passed unnoticed as she relived every moment she had spent with Jason, remembering how she had found herself looking for him outside the theater long before he introduced himself, remembering the instant attraction between them, the way she had known, that very first night, she could trust him.

A faint smile touched her lips as she caressed his cheek. She would have liked to walk along a sunlit beach with Jason at her side, watched the sun rise over the ocean, borne his children, grown old beside him.

She would have liked to make love to him one more time.

With a sigh she kissed him one last time, and then, very gently, she lowered his head to the floor and stood up.

Feeling empty and alone, she walked out of the house.

She hesitated on the veranda, her gaze caught by the fiery splendor of the sun as it climbed over the tops of the hills.

"I love you, Jason Blackthorne," she murmured, her fingertips absently stroking the heart-shaped locket he had given her. "I love you, and I'll never forget you." Tears welled in her eyes. "Never."

"Never is a long time."

Leanne whirled around, her hand flying to her throat. "Jason! You're alive!"

He held out his hands and flexed his fingers, looking at them as if he'd never seen them before. "So it would seem."

"But... but how?"

"I don't know." A wry grin tugged at his lips. "The love of a good woman, perhaps?" he mused, his finger catching a tear that hovered at the corner of her eye, "or perhaps it was the magic of a single tear shed for a monster who yearned to be a man."

They gazed at each other for a long moment, and then Leanne threw herself into his arms and hugged him tight.

"You're alive." She ran her fingertips over his face, then spread one hand over his chest, above his heart. "Alive," she murmured again. "Thank God."

He looked deep into her eyes, and then he smiled, a beautiful smile that went straight to her heart.

Lowering his head, he teased her lips with the tip of his tongue, and then he kissed her as gently as ever a man had kissed a woman, and it seemed he could taste the sunrise on her lips.

"Leanne," he murmured. "Do you think you could love this mortal man as you once loved the monster?"

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed softly, and the glow in her eyes was warmer and brighter than the sun he had thought never to see again.

His smile grew wider. "And do you think you could make love to me now, here, in the light of day?"

Happiness bubbled up inside of her. "I think so," she replied in a voice trembling with love and joy and excitement.

"And will you spend the rest of your life with me? Bear my children? Grow old at my side?"

"Yes," she promised fervently. "Oh, yes."

Jason sighed as he wrapped his arm around Leanne's shoulders and watched the sun climb in the sky, proclaiming the birth of a

new day.

It was a day of miracles, he thought, and Leanne's love was the greatest miracle of all.

She had been the sun in his sky since the first night he had seen her emerge from the theater.

Now, standing beside her, with the sunlight on his face and the warmth of her love shining in the depths of her eyes, he knew he would never dwell in darkness again.

Epilogue

Five years later

Jason leaned forward as his daughter made her entrance on stage. Facing the audience, Kristi Lynn began to sing, her voice pure and clear.

His daughter. Another miracle that Leanne had wrought in his life. And soon they would have a second child. And after that, a dozen more, if God and his wife were willing.

"She's wonderful, isn't she?" Leanne whispered.

"Indeed," he said. "She has her mother's talent."

Leanne grinned at him. "And her father's charm."

Jason took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. The last five years had been the happiest he had ever known. He had stood beside Leanne and watched the sun rise over the Grand Canyon, sat beside her on a sandy white beach in Hawaii and watched the waves lap at the shore. He grinned at the memory. He had sat there so long he'd gotten one hell of a sunburn. But even that had felt good.

He had watched Leanne's body swell with new life, stood at her side the morning Kristi Lynn had been born, felt his heart swell with awe when the doctor had placed his daughter in his arms. He had been there when she took her first steps, said her first word; ran alongside her the day she had learned to ride a bike.

He had turned to writing again, surprised and pleased when he sold his first book, a novel about a vampire. He had written three

others since then, each of which had received rave reviews. His favorite hung on the wall behind his desk. "*Jason Blackthorne's vampires are so real, so vivid, one would think he drew on personal experience.*"

He applauded loudly when Kristi Lynn finished her song.

Later that night, standing beside his daughter's bed while Leanne tucked her in, he thanked a generous, forgiving God for granting him a second chance at life.