

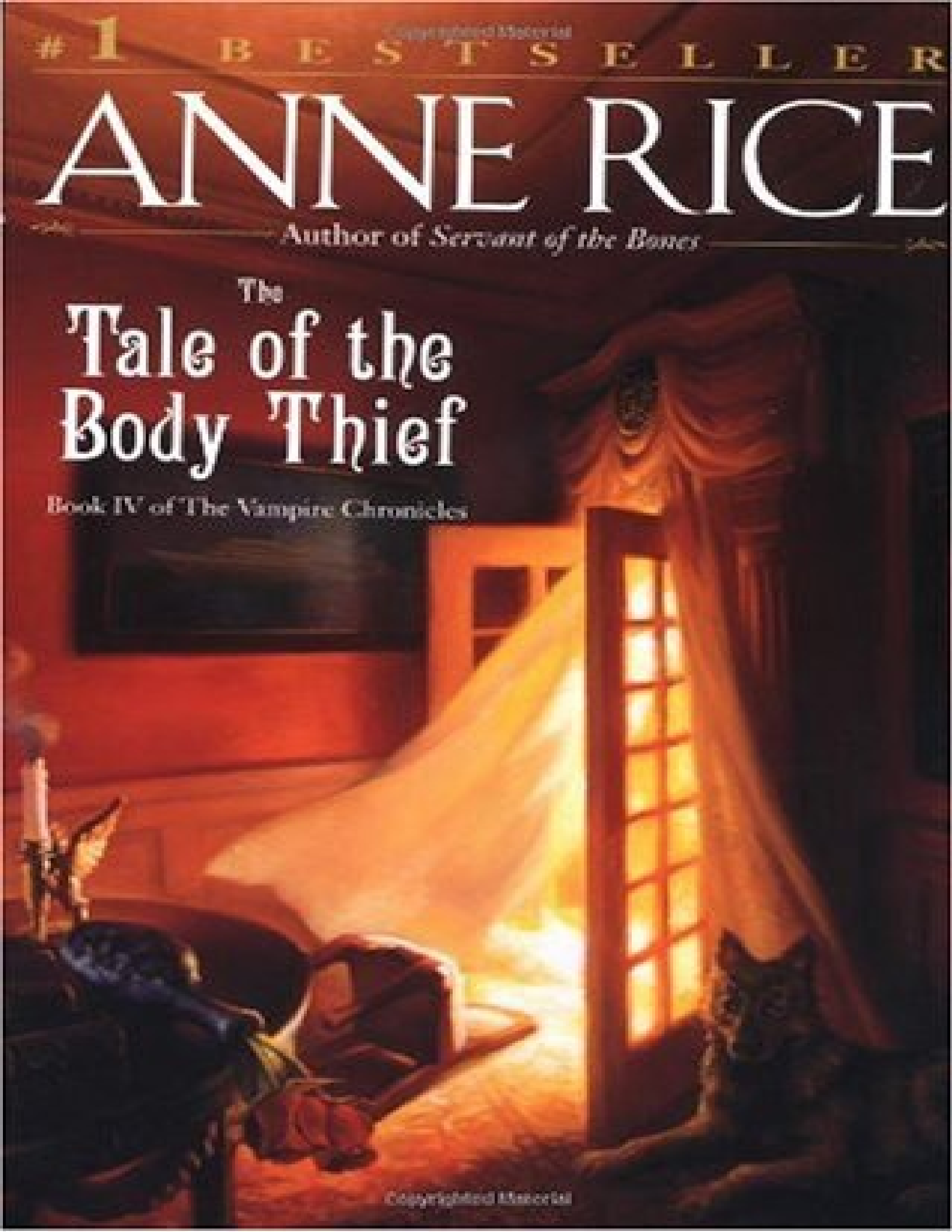
#1 BESTSELLER

ANNE RICE

Author of *Servant of the Bones*

The Tale of the Body Thief

Book IV of The Vampire Chronicles



The Tale Of The Body Thief

Vampire 04

Anne Rice

THE Vampire Lestat here. I have a story to tell you, It's about something that happened to me.

It begins in Miami, in the year 1990, and I really want to start right there. But it's important that I tell you about the dreams I'd been having before that time, for they are very much part of the tale too. I'm talking now about dreams of a child vampire with a woman's mind and an angel's face, and a dream of my mortal friend David Talbot.

But there were dreams also of my mortal boyhood in France ~ of winter snows, my father's bleak and ruined castle in the Au-vergne, and the time I went out to hunt a pack of wolves that were preying upon our poor village.

Dreams can be as real as events. Or so it seemed to me afterwards.

And I was in a dark frame of mind when these dreams began, a vagabond vampire roaming the earth, sometimes so covered with dust that no one took the slightest notice of me. What good was it to have full and beautiful blond hair, sharp blue eyes, razzle-dazzle clothes, an irresistible smile, and a well-proportioned body six feet in height that can, in spite of its two hundred years, pass for that of a twenty-year-old mortal. I was still a man of reason however, a child of the eighteenth century, in which I'd actually lived before I was Born to Darkness.

But as the 1980s were drawing to a close I was much changed from the dashing fledgling vampire I had once been, so attached to his classic black cape and Bruxelles lace, the gentleman with walking stick and white gloves, dancing beneath the gas lamp.

I had been transformed into a dark god of sorts, thanks to suffering and

triumph, and too much of the blood of our vampire elders. I had powers which left me baffled and sometimes even frightened, I had powers which made me sorrowful though I did not always understand the reason for it.

I could, for example, move high into the air at will, traveling the night winds over great distances as easily as a spirit. I could effect or destroy matter with the power of my mind. I could kindle a fire by the mere wish to do so. I could also call to other immortals over countries and continents with my preternatural voice, and I could effortlessly read the minds of vampires and humans.

Not bad, you might think. I loathed it. Without doubt, I was grieving for my old selves-the mortal boy, the newborn revenant once determined to be good at being bad if that was his predicament.

I'm not a pragmatist, understand. I have a keen and merciless conscience. I could have been a nice guy. Maybe at times I am. But always, I've been a man of action. Grief is a waste, and so is fear. And action is what you will get here, as soon as I get through this introduction.

Remember, beginnings are always hard and most are artificial. It was the best of times and the worst of times-really? When! And all happy families are not alike; even Tolstoy must have realized that. I can't get away with "In the beginning," or "They threw me off the hay truck at noon," or I would do it. I always get away with whatever I can, believe me. And as Nabokov said in the voice of Humbert Humbert, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." Can '(fancy mean experimental? I already know of course that I am sensuous, florid, lush, humid-enough critics have told me that.

Alas, I have to do things my own way. And we will get to the beginning-if that isn't a contradiction in terms-I promise you.

Right now I must explain that before this adventure commenced, I was also grieving for the other immortals I had known and loved, because they had long ago scattered from our last late-twentieth century gathering place. Folly to think we wanted to create a coven again. They had one by one disappeared into time and the world, which was inevitable.

Vampires don't really like others of their kind, though their need for immortal companions is desperate.

Out of that need I'd made my fledglings-Louis de Pointe du Lac, who became my patient and often loving nineteenth-century comrade, and with his unwitting aid, the beautiful and doomed child vampire, Claudia. And during these lonely vagabond nights of the late twentieth century, Louis was the only immortal whom I saw quite often. The most human of us all, the most ungodlike.

I never stayed away too long from his shack in the wilderness of uptown New Orleans. But you'll see. I'll get to that. Louis is in this story.

The point is-you 'll find precious little here about the others. Indeed, almost nothing.

Except for Claudia. I was dreaming more and more often of Claudia. Let me explain about Claudia. She'd been destroyed over a century before, yet I felt her presence all the time as if she were just around the corner.

It was 1794 when I made this succulent little vampire out of a dying orphan, and sixty years passed before she rose up against me. "I'll put you in your coffin forever, Father."

I did sleep in a coffin then. And it was a period piece, that lurid attempted murder, involving as it did mortal victims baited with poisons to cloud my mind, knives tearing my white flesh, and the ultimate abandonment of my seemingly lifeless form in the rank waters of the swamp beyond the dim lights of New Orleans.

Well, it didn't work. There are very few sure ways to kill the undead. The sun, fire... One must aim for total obliteration. And after all, we are talking about the Vampire Lestat here.

Claudia suffered for this crime, being executed later by an evil coven of blood drinkers who thrived in the very heart of Paris in the infamous Theatre of the Vampires. I'd broken the rules when I made a blood drinker of a child so small, and for that reason alone, the Parisian monsters might have put an end to her. But she too had broken their rules in trying to destroy her maker, and that you might say was their logical reason for shutting her out into the bright light of day which burnt her to ashes.

It's a hell of a way to execute someone, as far as I'm concerned, because those who lock you out must quickly retire to their coffins and are not even there to witness the mighty sun carrying out their grim sentence. But that's what they did to this exquisite and delicate creature that I had fashioned with my vampiric blood from a ragged, dirty waif in a ramshackle Spanish colony in the New World-to be my friend, my pupil, my love, my muse, my fellow hunter. And yes, my daughter.

If you read Interview with the Vampire, then you know all about this. It's Louis's version of our time together. Louis tells of his love for this our child, and of his vengeance against those who destroyed her.

If you read my autobiographical books, The Vampire Lestat and The Queen of the Damned, you know all about me, also. You know our history, for what it's worth-and history is never worth too much-and how we came into being thousands of years ago and that we propagate by carefully giving the Dark Blood to mortals when we wish to take them along the Devil's Road with us.

But you don't have to read those works to understand this one. And you won't find here the cast of thousands that crowded The Queen of the Damned, either. Western civilization will not for one second teeter on the brink. And there will be no revelations from ancient times or old ones confiding half-truths and riddles and promising answers that do not in fact exist and never have existed.

No, I have done all that before.

This is a contemporary story. It's a volume in the Vampire Chronicles, make no mistake. But it is the first really modern volume, for it accepts the horrifying absurdity of existence from the start, and it takes us into the mind and the soul of its hero- guess who?-for its discoveries.

Read this tale, and I will give you all you need to know about us as you turn the pages. And by the way, lots of things do happen! I'm a man of action as I said-the James Bond of the vampires, if you will-called the Brat Prince, and the Damnedest Creature, and "you monster" by various and sundry other immortals.

The other immortals are still around, of course-Maharet and Mekare, the

eldest of us all, Khayman of the First Brood, Eric, Santino, Pandora, and others whom we call the Children of the Millennia. Armand is still about, the lovely five-hundred-year-old boy-faced ancient who once ruled the Theatre des Vampires, and before that a coven of devil worshiping blood drinkers who lived beneath the Paris Cemetery, Les Innocents. Armand, I hope, will always be around.

And Gabrielle, my mortal mother and immortal child will no doubt turn up one of these nights sometime before the end of another thousand years, if I'm lucky.

As for Marius, my old teacher and mentor, the one who kept the historical secrets of our tribe, he is still with us and always will be. Before this tale began, he would come to me now and then to scold and plead: Would I not stop my careless kills which invariably found their way into the pages of mortal newspapers! Would I not stop deviling my mortal friend David Talbot, and tempting him with the Dark Gift of our blood? Better we make no more, did I not know this?

Rules, rules, rules. They always wind up talking about rules. And I love to break the rules the way mortals like to smash their crystal glasses after a toast against the bricks of the fireplace.

But enough about the others. The point is-this is my book from start to finish.

Let me speak now of the dreams that had come to trouble me in my wanderings.

With Claudia, it was almost a haunting. Just before my eyes would close each dawn, I'd see her beside me, hear her voice in a low and urgent whisper. And sometimes I'd slide back over the centuries to the little colonial hospital with its rows of tiny beds where the orphan child had been dying.

Behold the sorrowful old doctor, potbellied and palsied, as he lifts the child's body. And that crying. Who is crying? Claudia was not crying. She slept as the doctor entrusted her to me, believing me to be her mortal father. And she is so pretty in these dreams. Was she that pretty then? Of course she was.

"Snatching me from mortal hands like two grim monsters in a nightmare fairy tale, you idle, blind parents!"

The dream of David Talbot came once only.

David is young in the dream and he is walking in a mangrove forest. He was not the man of seventy-four who had become my friend, the patient mortal scholar who regularly refused my offer of the Dark Blood, and laid his warm, fragile hand on my cold flesh unflinchingly to demonstrate the affection and trust between us.

No. This is young David Talbot of years and years ago, when his heart didn't beat so fast within his chest. Yet he is in danger.

Tyger, tyger burning bright.

Is that his voice, whispering those words or is it mine?

And out of the dappled light it comes, its orange and black stripes like the light and shade itself so that it is scarcely visible. I see its huge head, and how soft its muzzle, white and bristling with long, delicate whiskers. But look at its yellow eyes, mere slits, and full of horrid mindless cruelty. David, its fangs! Can't you see these fangs!

But he is curious as a child, watching its big pink tongue touch his throat, touch the thin gold chain he wears around his throat. Is it eating the chain? Good God, David! The fangs.

Why is my voice dried up inside me? Am I even there in the mangrove forest? My body vibrates as I struggle to move, dull moans coming from behind my sealed lips, and each moan taxes every fiber of my being. David, beware!

And then I see that he is down on one knee, with the long shiny rifle cocked against his shoulder. And the giant cat is still yards away, bearing down on him. On and on it rushes, until the crack of the gun stops it in its tracks, and over it goes as the gun roars once again, its yellow eyes full of rage, its paws crossed as they push in one last final breath at the soft earth.

I wake.

What does this dream mean-that my mortal friend is in danger? Or simply that his genetic clock has ticked to a stop. For a man of seventy-four years, death can come at any instant.

Do I ever think of David that I do not think of death?

David, where are you?

Fee, Fie, Fo, Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman.

"I want you to ask me for the Dark Gift," I'd said to him when first we met. "I may not give it to you. But I want you to ask."

Henever had. He never would. And now I loved him. I saw him soon after the dream. I had to. But I could not forget the dream and perhaps it did come to me more than once in the deep sleep of my daylight hours when I am stone cold and helpless under literal cover of darkness.

All right, you have the dreams now.

But picture the winter snow in France one more time, if you would, piling about the castle walls, and a young male mortal asleep on his bed of hay, in the light of the fire, with his hunting dogs beside him. This had become the image of my lost human life, more truly than any remembrance of the boulevard theatre in Paris, where before the Revolution I'd been so very happy as a young actor.

Now we are truly ready to begin. Let's turn the page, shall we?

THE TALE

OF THE

BODY THIEF

ONE

MIAMI-the vampires' city. This is South Beach at sunset, in the luxurious warmth of the winterless winter, clean and thriving and drenched in electric light, the gentle breeze moving in from the placid sea, across the dark margin of cream-colored sand, to cool the smooth broad pavements full of happy mortal children.

Sweet the parade of fashionable young men displaying their cultured muscles with touching vulgarity, of young women so proud of their streamlined and seemingly sexless modern limbs, amid the soft urgent roar of traffic and human voices.

Old stucco hostelryes, once the middling shelters of the aged, were now reborn in smart pastel colors, sporting their new names in elegant neon script. Candles flickered on the white-draped tables of the open-porch restaurants. Big shiny American cars pushed their way slowly along the avenue, as drivers and passengers viewed the dazzling human parade, lazy pedestrians here and there blocking the thoroughfare.

On the distant horizon the great white clouds were mountains beneath a roofless and star-filled heaven. Ah, it never failed to take my breath away-this southern sky filled with azure light and drowsy relentless movement.

To the north rose the towers of new Miami Beach in all their splendour. To the south and to the west, the dazzling steel skyscrapers of the downtown city with its high roaring freeways and busy cruise-ship docks. Small pleasure boats sped along the sparkling waters of the myriad urban canals.

In the quiet immaculate gardens of Coral Gables, countless lamps illuminated the handsome sprawling villas with their red-tiled roofs, and swimming pools shimmering with turquoise light. Ghosts walked in the grand and darkened rooms of the Biltmore. The massive mangrove trees threw out their primitive limbs to cover the broad and carefully tended streets.

In Coconut Grove, the international shoppers thronged the luxurious hotels and fashionable malls. Couples embraced on the high balconies of their glass-walled condominiums, silhouettes gazing out over the serene waters of the

bay. Cars sped along the busy roads past the ever-dancing palms and delicate rain trees, past the squat concrete mansions draped with red and purple bougainvillea, behind their fancy iron gates.

All of this is Miami, city of water, city of speed, city of tropical flowers, city of enormous skies. It is for Miami, more than any other place, that I periodically leave my New Orleans home. The men and women of many nations and different colors live in the great dense neighborhoods of Miami. One hears Yiddish,

Hebrew, the languages of Spain, of Haiti, the dialects and accents of Latin America, of the deep south of this nation and of the far north. There is menace beneath the shining surface of Miami, there is desperation and a throbbing greed; there is the deep steady pulse of a great capital-the tow grinding energy, the endless risk.

It's never really dark in Miami. It's never really quiet.

It is the perfect city for the vampire; and it never fails to yield to me a mortal killer-some twisted, sinister morsel who will give up to me a dozen of his own murders as I drain his memory banks and his blood.

But tonight it was the Big-Game Hunt, the unseasonal Easter feast after a Lent of starvation-the pursuit of one of those splendid human trophies whose gruesome modus operandi reads for pages in the computer files of mortal law enforcement agencies, a being anointed in his anonymity with a flashy name by the worshipful press: "Back Street Strangler."

I lust after such killers!

What luck for me that such a celebrity had surfaced in my favorite city. What luck that he has struck six times in these very streets-slayer of the old and the infirm, who have come in such numbers to live out their remaining days in these warm climes. Ah, I would have crossed a continent to snap him up, but he is here waiting for me. To his dark history, detailed by no less than twenty criminologists, and easily purloined by me through the computer in my New Orleans lair, I have secretly added the crucial elements-his name and mortal habitation.

A simple trick for a dark god who can read minds. Through his blood-soaked