

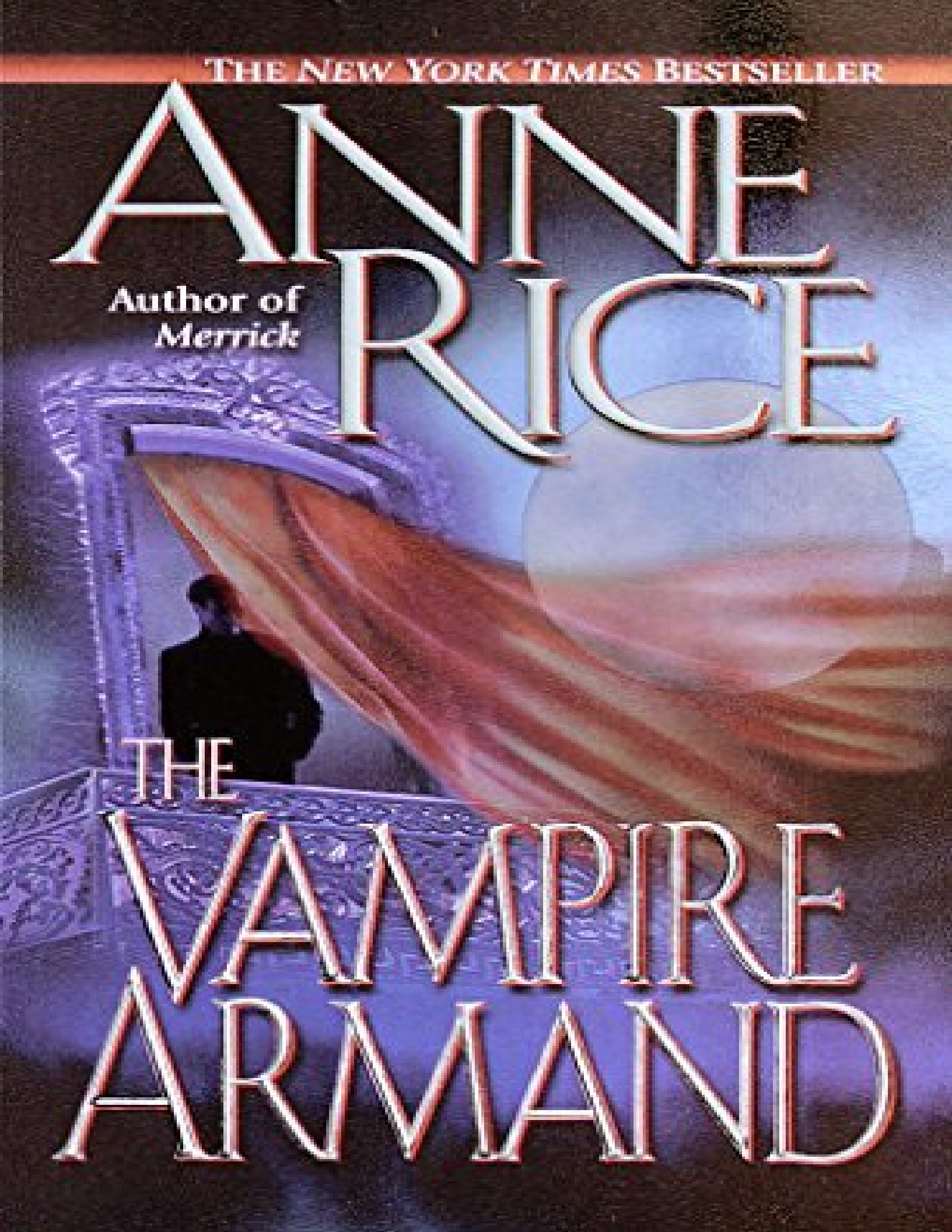
THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

ANNE RICE

Author of
Merrick

THE

VAMPIRE ARMAND



THE VAMPIRE ARMAND

THE VAMPIRE CHRONICLES

ANNE RICE

Jesus, speaking to Mary Magdalene:

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN 20:17

PART 1

BODY and BLOOD

THEY SAID a child had died in the attic. Her clothes had been discovered in the wall. I wanted to go up there, and to lie down near the wall, and be alone.

They'd seen her ghost now and then, the child. But none of these vampires could see spirits, really, at least not the way that I could see them. No matter. It wasn't the company of the child I wanted. It was to be in that place.

Nothing more could be gained from lingering near Lestat. I'd come. I'd fulfilled my purpose. I couldn't help him.

The sight of his sharply focused and unchanging eyes unnerved me, and I was quiet inside and full of love for those nearest me-my human children, my dark-haired little Benji and my tender willowy Sybelle-but I was not strong enough just yet to take them away.

I left the chapel.

I didn't even take note of who was there. The whole convent was now the dwelling place of vampires. It was not an unruly place, or a neglected place, but I didn't notice who remained in the chapel when I left.

Lestat lay as he had all along, on the marble floor of the chapel in front of the huge crucifix, on his side, his hands slack, the left hand just below the right hand, its fingers touching the marble lightly, as if with a purpose, when there was no purpose at all. The fingers of his right hand curled, making a little hollow in the palm where the light fell, and that too seemed to have a meaning, but there was no meaning. This was simply the preternatural body lying there without will or animation, no more purposeful than the face, its expression almost defiantly intelligent, given that months had passed in which Lestat had not moved.

The high stained-glass windows were dutifully draped for him before sunrise.

At night, they shone with all the wondrous candles scattered about the fine statues and relics which filled this once sanctified and holy place. Little mortal children had heard Mass under this high coved roof; a priest had sung out the Latin words from an altar. It was ours now. It belonged to him-Lestat, the man who lay motionless on the marble floor.

Man. Vampire. Immortal. Child of Darkness. Any and all are excellent words for him.

Looking over my shoulder at him, I never felt so much like a child. That's what I am. I fill out the definition, as if it were encoded in me perfectly, and there had never been any other genetic design. I was perhaps seventeen years old when Marius made me into a vampire. I had stopped growing by that time. For a year, I'd been five feet six inches. My hands are as delicate as those of a young woman, and I was beardless, as we used to say in that time, the years of the sixteenth century. Not a eunuch, no, not that, most certainly, but a boy. It was fashionable then for boys to be as beautiful as girls. Only now does it seem something worthwhile, and that's because I love the others-my own: Sybelle with her woman's breasts and long girlish limbs, and Benji with his round intense little Arab face.

I stood at the foot of the stairs. No mirrors here, only the high brick walls stripped of their plaster, walls that were old only for America, darkened by the damp even inside the convent, all textures and elements here softened by the simmering summers of New Orleans and her clammy crawling winters, green winters I call them because the trees here are almost never bare.

I was born in a place of eternal winter when one compares it to this place. No wonder in sunny Italy I forgot the beginnings altogether, and fashioned my life out of the present of my years with Marius. "I don't remember." It was a condition of loving so much vice, of being so addicted to Italian wine and sumptuous meals, and even the feel of the warm marble under my bare feet when the rooms of the palazzo were sinfully, wickedly heated by Marius's exorbitant fires. His mortal friends ... human beings like me at that time ... scolded constantly about these expenditures: firewood, oil, candles. And for Marius only the finest candles of beeswax were acceptable. Every fragrance

was significant.

Stop these thoughts. Memories can't hurt you now. You came here for a reason and now you have finished, and you must find those you love, your young mortals, Benji and Sybelle, and you must go on.

Life was no longer a theatrical stage where Banquo's ghost came again and again to seat himself at the grim table.

My soul hurt.

Up the stairs. Lie for a little while in this brick convent where the child's clothes were found. Lie with the child, murdered here in this convent, so say the rumormongers, the vampires who haunt these halls now, who have come to see the great Vampire Lestat in his Endymion-like sleep.

I felt no murder here, only the tender voices of nuns. I went up the staircase, letting my body find its human weight and human tread.

After five hundred years, I know such tricks. I could frighten all the young ones-the hangers-on and the gawkers-just as surely as the other ancient ones did it, even the most modest, uttering words to evince their telepathy, or vanishing when they chose to leave, or now and then even making the building tremble with their power-an interesting accomplishment even with these walls eighteen inches thick with cypress sills that will never rot.

He must like the fragrances here, I thought. Marius, where is he? Before I had visited Lestat, I had not wanted to talk very much to Marius, and had spoken only a few civil words when I left my treasures in his charge.

After all, I had brought my children into a menagerie of the Undead. Who better to safeguard them than my beloved Marius, so powerful that none here dared question his smallest request.

There is no telepathic link between us naturally-Marius made me, I am forever his fledgling-but as soon as this occurred to me, I realized without the aid of this telepathic link that I could not feel the presence of Marius in the

building. I didn't know what had happened in that brief interval when I knelt down to look at Lestat. I didn't know where Marius was. I couldn't catch the familiar human scents of Benji or Sybelle. A little stab of panic paralyzed me.

I stood on the second story of the building. I leaned against the wall, my eyes settling with determined calm on the deeply varnished heart pine floor. The light made pools of yellow on the boards. Where were they, Benji and Sybelle? What had I done in bringing them here, two ripe and glorious humans? Benji was a spirited boy of twelve, Sybelle, a womanling of twenty-five. What if Marius, so generous in his own soul, had carelessly let them out of his sight?

"I'm here, young one." The voice was abrupt, soft, welcome. My Maker stood on the landing just below me, having come up the steps behind me, or more truly, with his powers, having placed himself there, covering the preceding distance with silent and invisible speed.

"Master," I said with a little trace of a smile. "I was afraid for them for a moment." It was an apology. "This place makes me sad." He nodded. "I have them, Armand," he said. "The city seethes with mortals. There's food enough for all the vagabonds wandering here. No one will hurt them. Even if I weren't here to say so, no one would dare."

It was I who nodded now. I wasn't so sure, really. Vampires are by their very nature perverse and do wicked and terrible things simply for the sport of it. To kill another's mortal pet would be a worthy entertainment for some grim and alien creature, skirting the fringes here, drawn by remarkable events.

"You're a wonder, young one," he said to me smiling. Young one! Who else would call me this but Marius, my Maker, and what is five hundred years to him? "You went into the sun, child," he continued with the same legible concern written on his kind face. "And you lived to tell the tale."

"Into the sun, Master?" I questioned his words. But I myself did not want to reveal any more. I did not want to talk yet, to tell of what had happened, the legend of Veronica's Veil and the Face of Our Lord emblazoned upon it, and the morning when I had given up my soul with such perfect happiness. What

a fable it was.

He came up the steps to be near me, but kept a polite distance. He has always been the gentleman, even before there was such a word. In ancient Rome, they must have had a term for such a person, infallibly good mannered, and considerate as a point of honor, and wholly successful at common courtesy to rich and poor alike. This was Marius, and it had always been Marius, insofar as I could know. He let his snow-white hand rest on the dull satiny banister. He wore a long shapeless cloak of gray velvet, once perfectly extravagant, now downplayed with wear and rain, and his yellow hair was long like Lestat's hair, full of random light and unruly in the damp, and even studded with drops of dew from outside, the same dew clinging to his golden eyebrows and darkening his long curling eyelashes around his large cobalt-blue eyes.

There was something altogether more Nordic and icy about him than there was about Lestat, whose hair tended more to golden, for all its luminous highlights, and whose eyes were forever prismatic, drinking up the colors around him, becoming even a gorgeous violet with the slightest provocation from the worshipful outside world. In Marius, I saw the sunny skies of the northern wilderness, eyes of steady radiance which rejected any outside color, perfect portals to his own most constant soul.

"Armand," he said. "I want you to come with me."

"Where is that, Master, come where?" I asked. I too wanted to be civil. He had always, even after a struggle of wits, brought such finer instincts out of me.

"To my house, Armand, where they are now, Sybelle and Benji. Oh, don't fear for them for a second. Pandora's with them. They are rather astonishing mortals, brilliant, remarkably different, yet alike. They love you, and they know so much and have come with you rather a long way."

I flushed with blood and color; the warmth was stinging and unpleasant, and then as the blood danced back away from the surface of my face, I felt cooler and strangely enervated that I felt any sensations at all.

It was a shock being here and I wanted it to be over.

"Master, I don't know who I am in this new life," I said gratefully.

"Reborn? Confused?" I hesitated, but there was no use stopping it.

"Don't ask me to stay here just now. Maybe some time when Lestat is himself again, maybe when enough time has passed-. I don't know for certain, only that I can't accept your kind invitation now." He gave me a brief accepting nod. With his hand he made a little acquiescent gesture. His old gray cloak had slipped off one shoulder. He seemed not to care about it. His thin black wool clothes were neglected, lapels and pockets trimmed in a careless gray dust. That was not right for him.

He had a big shock of white silk at his throat that made his pale face seem more colored and human than it otherwise would. But the silk was torn as if by brambles. In sum, he haunted the world in these clothes, rather than was dressed in them. They were for a stumbler, not my old Master.

I think he knew I was at a loss. I was looking up at the gloom above me. I wanted to reach the attic of this place, the half-concealed clothing of the dead child. I wondered at this story of the dead child. I had the impertinence to let my mind drift, though he was waiting. He brought me back with his gentle words:

"Sybelle and Benji will be with me when you want them," he said. "You can find us. We aren't far. You'll hear the Appassionato when you want to hear it." He smiled.

"You've given her a piano," I said. I spoke of golden Sybelle. I had shut out the world from my preternatural hearing, and I didn't want just yet to unstop my ears even for the lovely sound of her playing, which I already missed overly much.

As soon as we'd entered the convent, Sybelle had seen a piano and asked in a whisper at my ear if she could play it. It was not in the chapel where Lestat

lay, but off in another long empty room. I had told her it wasn't quite proper, that it might disturb Lestat as he lay there, and we couldn't know what he thought, or what he felt, or if he was anguished and trapped in his own dreams.

"Perhaps when you come, you'll stay for a while," Marius said.

"You'll like the sound of her playing my piano, and maybe then we'll talk together, and you can rest with us, and we can share the house for as long as you like."

I didn't answer.

"It's palatial in a New World sort of way," he said with a little mockery in his smile. "It's not far at all. I have the most spacious gardens and old oaks, oaks far older than those even out there on the Avenue, and all the windows are doors. You know how I like it that way. It's the Roman style. The house is open to the spring rain, and the spring rain here is like a dream."

"Yes, I know," I whispered. "I think it's falling now, isn't it?" I smiled.

"Well, I'm rather spattered with it, yes," he said almost gaily. "You come when you want to. If not tonight, then tomorrow ..."

"Oh, I'll be there tonight," I said. I didn't want to offend him, not in the slightest, but Benji and Sybelle had seen enough of white-faced monsters with velvet voices. It was time to be off.

I looked at him rather boldly, enjoying it for a moment, overcoming a shyness that had been our curse in this modern world. In Venice of old, he had gloried in his clothes as men did then, always so sharp and splendidly embellished, the glass of fashion, to use the old graceful phrase. When he crossed the Piazza San Marco in the soft purple of evening, all turned to watch him pass. Red had been his badge of pride, red velvet—a flowing cape, and magnificently embroidered doublet, and beneath it a tunic of gold silk tissue, so very popular in those times. He'd had the hair of a young Lorenzo de' Medici, right from the painted wall.

"Master, I love you, but now I must be alone," I said. "You don't need me now, do you, Sir? How can you? You never really did." Instantly I regretted it. The words, not the tone, were impudent. And our minds being so divided by intimate blood, I was afraid he'd misunderstand.

"Cherub, I want you," he said forgivingly. "But I can wait. Seems not long ago I spoke these same words when we were together, and so I say them again."

I couldn't bring myself to tell him it was my season for mortal company, how I longed just to be talking away the night with little Benji, who was such a sage, or listening to my beloved Sybelle play her sonata over and over again. It seemed beside the point to explain any further. And the sadness came over me again, heavily and undeniably, of having come to this forlorn and empty convent where Lestat lay, unable or unwilling to move or speak, none of us knew.

"Nothing will come of my company just now, Master," I said. "But you will grant me some key to finding you, surely, so that when this time passes ..." I let my words die.

"I fear for you!" he whispered suddenly, with great warmth.

"Any more than ever before, Sir?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. Then he said, "Yes. You love two mortal children. They are your moon and stars. Come stay with me if only for a little while. Tell me what you think of our Lestat and what's happened. Tell me perhaps, if I promise to remain very quiet and not to press you, tell me your opinion of all you've so recently seen."

"You touch on it delicately, Sir, I admire you. You mean why did I believe Lestat when he said he had been to Heaven and Hell, you mean what did I see when I looked at the relic he brought back with him, Veronica's Veil."

"If you want to tell me. But more truly, I wish you would come and rest."