

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Blackwood Farm

Anne Rice

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## About the Book

A terrifying drama of bloodlust and betrayal is unravelling within the Blackwood Farm family. Their grand Southern mansion, set among dark cypress swamps in Louisiana, harbours terrible, blood-stained secrets.

Heir to them all is the young, rash and beautiful Quinn Blackwood. But he is being controlled an evil spirit, a demon who could destroy him and others. Only the unearthly power of the vampire Lestat, combined with the earthly powers of the ubiquitous Mayfair witch clan can save Quinn from himself, and rescue the doomed girl he loves from her own mortality.

Shocking, savage and richly erotic, this novel brings us Anne Rice at her most powerfully disturbing. Here are vampire and witches, men and women, demons and doppelgangers, caught up in a maelstrom of death and destruction, blood and fire, cruelty and fate.

## About the Author

Born in New Orleans in 1941, the second daughter of an Irish Catholic family, Anne Rice came to international fame for 'The Vampire Chronicles', which include *Interview with the Vampire* (filmed by Neil Jordan, starring Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt), *The Tale of the Body Thief* and the latest volume *Blood Canticle*. Her other fiction includes the shorter vampire novels, *Pandora* and *Vittorio the Vampire*, as well as *The Witching Hour*, *Lasher*, *The Mummy*, *The Feast of All Saints* and *Cry to Heaven*. She was born in New Orleans, where she lived for many years, and now lives in Rancho Mirage, California.

*Also by Anne Rice*

THE VAMPIRE CHRONICLES  
*Interview with the Vampire*  
*The Vampire Lestat*  
*The Queen on the Damned*  
*The Vampire Armand*  
*Merrick*  
*The Tale of the Body Thief*  
*Memnoch the Devil*  
*Blood and Gold*  
*Blood Canticle*

LIVES OF THE MAYFAIR WITCHES  
*The Witching Hour*  
*Lasher*  
*Taltos*

NEW TALES OF THE VAMPIRES  
*Pandora*  
*Vittorio, the Vampire*

OTHER WORKS  
*The Feast of all Saints*  
*Cry to Heaven*  
*The Mummy*  
*Servant of the Bones*  
*Violin*  
*Christ the Lord*  
*Called Out of Darkness*  
*Angel Time*

UNDER THE NAME ANNE RAMPLING  
*Exit to Eden*  
*Belinda*

UNDER THE NAME A. N. ROQUELAURE  
*The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty*  
*Beauty's Punishment*  
*Beauty's Release*

# Blackwood Farm

THE VAMPIRE CHRONICLES

ANNE RICE



arrow books



Dedicated to my son, Christopher Rice

*My days have passed away, my thoughts are dissipated,  
tormenting my heart.  
They have turned night into day, and after darkness I hope  
for light again.  
If I wait hell is my house, and I have made my bed in  
darkness.  
I have said to rottenness: thou art my father; to worms, my  
mother and my sister.  
Where is now then my expectation, and who considereth my  
patience?  
All that I have shall go down into the deepest pit: thinkest  
thou that there at least I shall have rest?*

Job 17:11-16 dv.

## ONE

LESTAT,

If you find this letter in your house in the Rue Royale, and I do sincerely think you will find it - you'll know at once that I've broken your rules.

I know that New Orleans is off limits to Blood Hunters, and that any found there will be destroyed by you. And unlike many a rogue invader whom you have already dispatched, I understand your reasons. You don't want us to be seen by members of the Talamasca. You don't want a war with the venerable Order of Psychic Detectives, both for their sake and ours.

But please, I beg you, before you come in search of me, read what I have to say.

My name is Quinn. I'm twenty-two years old, and have been a Blood Hunter, as my Maker called it, for slightly less than a year. I'm an orphan now, as I see it, and it is to you that I turn for help.

But before I make my case, please understand that I know the Talamasca, that I knew them before the Dark Blood was ever given to me, and I know of their inherent goodness and their legendary neutrality as regards things supernatural, and I will have taken great pains to elude them in placing this letter in your flat.

That you keep a telepathic watch over New Orleans is plain to me. That you'll find the letter I have no doubt.

If you do come to bring a swift justice to me for my disobedience, assure me please that you will do your utmost to destroy a spirit which has been my companion since I was a child. This creature, a duplicate of me who

has grown with me since before I can remember, now poses a danger to humans as well as to myself.

Let me explain.

As a little boy I named this spirit Goblin, and that was well before anyone had told me nursery rhymes or fairy tales in which such a word might appear. Whether the name came from the spirit himself I don't know. However, at the mere mention of the name, I could always call him to me. Many a time he came of his own accord and wouldn't be banished. At others, he was the only friend I had. Over the years, he has been my constant familiar, maturing as I matured and becoming ever more skilled at making known to me his wishes. You could say I strengthened and shaped Goblin, unwittingly creating the monster that he is now.

The truth is, I can't imagine existence without Goblin. But I have to imagine it. I have to put an end to Goblin before he metamorphoses into something utterly beyond my control.

Why do I call him a monster - this creature who was once my only playmate? The answer is simple. In the months since my being made a Blood Hunter - and understand, I had no choice whatsoever in the matter - Goblin has acquired his own taste for blood. After every feeding, I am embraced by him, and blood is drawn from me into him by a thousand infinitesimal wounds, strengthening the image of him, and lending to his presence a soft fragrance which Goblin never had before. With each passing month, Goblin becomes stronger, and his assaults on me more prolonged.

I can no longer fight him off.

It won't surprise you, I don't think, that these assaults are vaguely pleasurable, not as pleasurable to me as feeding on a human victim, but they involve a vague orgasmic shimmer that I can't deny.

But it is not my vulnerability to Goblin that worries me now. It is the question of what Goblin may become.

Now, I have read your Vampire Chronicles through and through. They were bequeathed to me by my Maker, an ancient Blood Hunter who gave me, according to his own version of things, an enormous amount of strength as well.

In your stories you talk of the origins of the vampires, quoting an ancient Egyptian Elder Blood Drinker who told the tale to the wise one, Marius, who centuries ago passed it on to you.

Whether you and Marius made up some of what was written in your books I don't know. You and your comrades, the Coven of the Articulate, as you are now called, may well have a penchant for telling lies.

But I don't think so. I'm living proof that Blood Drinkers exist - whether they are called Blood Drinkers, vampires, Children of the Night or Children of the Millennia - and the manner in which I was made conforms to what you describe.

Indeed, though my Maker called us Blood Hunters rather than vampires, he used words which have appeared in your tales. The Cloud Gift he gave to me so that I can travel effortlessly by air; and also the Mind Gift to seek out telepathically the sins of my victims; as well as the Fire Gift to ignite the fire in the iron stove here that keeps me warm.

So I believe your stories. I believe in you.

I believe you when you say that Akasha, the first of the vampires, was created when an evil spirit invaded every fiber of her being, a spirit which had, before attacking her, acquired a taste for human blood.

I believe you when you say that this spirit, named Amel by the two witches who could see him and hear him - Maharet and Mekare - exists now in all of us, his mysterious body, if we may call it that, having grown like a rampant vine to blossom in every Blood Hunter who is made by another, right on up to the present time.

I know as well from your stories that when the witches Mekare and Maharet were made Blood Hunters, they lost

the ability to see and talk to spirits. And indeed my Maker told me that I would lose mine.

But I assure you, I have not lost my powers as a seer of spirits. I am still their magnet. And it is perhaps this ability in me, this receptiveness, and my early refusal to spurn Goblin, that have given him the strength to be plaguing me for vampiric blood now.

Lestat, if this creature grows ever more strong, and it seems there is nothing I can do to stop him, is it possible that he can enter a human being, as Amel did in ancient times? Is it possible that yet another species of the vampiric root may be created, and from that root yet another vine?

I cannot imagine your being indifferent to this question, or to the possibility that Goblin will become a killer of humans, though he is far from that strength right now.

I think you will understand when I say that I'm frightened for those whom I love and cherish - my mortal family - as well as for any stranger whom Goblin might eventually attack.

It's hard to write these words. For all my life I have loved Goblin and scorned anyone who denigrated him as an "imaginary playmate" or a "foolish obsession." But he and I, for so long mysterious bedfellows, are now enemies, and I dread his attacks because I feel his increasing strength.

Goblin withdraws from me utterly when I am not hunting, only to reappear when the fresh blood is in my veins. We have no spiritual intercourse now, Goblin and I. He seems afire with jealousy that I've become a Blood Hunter. It's as though his childish mind has been wiped clean of all it once learned.

It is an agony for me, all of this.

But let me repeat: it is not on my account that I write to you. It is in fear of what Goblin may become.

Of course I want to lay eyes upon you. I want to talk to you. I want to be received, if such a thing is possible, into

the Coven of the Articulate. I want you, the great breaker of rules, to forgive me that I have broken yours.

I want you who were kidnapped and made a vampire against your will to look kindly on me because the same thing happened to me.

I want you to forgive my trespass into your old flat in the Rue Royale, where I hope to hide this letter. I want you to know as well that I haven't hunted in New Orleans and never will.

And speaking of hunting, I too have been taught to hunt the Evil Doer, and though my record isn't perfect, I'm learning with each feast. I've also mastered the Little Drink, as you so elegantly call it, and I'm a visitor to noisy mortal parties who is never noticed as he feeds from one after another in quick and deft moves.

But in the main, my existence is lonely and bitter. If it weren't for my mortal family, it would be unendurable. As for my Maker, I shun him and his cohorts, and with reason.

That's a story I'd like to tell you. In fact, there are many stories I want to tell you. I pray that my stories might keep you from destroying me. You know, we could play a game. We meet and I start talking, and slap damn, you kill me when I take a verbal turn you don't like.

But seriously, Goblin is my concern.

Let me add before I close that during this last year of being a fledgling Blood Hunter, of reading your Chronicles and trying to learn from them, I have often been tempted to go to the Talamasca Motherhouse at Oak Haven, outside of New Orleans. I have often been tempted to ask the Talamasca for counsel and help.

When I was a boy - and I'm hardly more than that now - there was a member of the Talamasca who was able to see Goblin as clearly as I could - a gentle, nonjudgmental Englishman named Stirling Oliver, who advised me about my powers and how they could become too strong for me to control. I grew to love Stirling within a very short time.

I also fell deeply in love with a young girl who was in the company of Stirling when I met him, a red-haired beauty with considerable paranormal power who could also see Goblin - one to whom the Talamasca had opened its generous heart.

That young girl is beyond my reach now. Her name is Mayfair, a name that is not unfamiliar to you, though this young girl probably knows nothing of your friend and companion Merrick Mayfair, even to this day.

But she is most certainly from the same family of powerful psychics - they seem to delight in calling themselves witches - and I have sworn never to see her again. With her considerable powers she would realize at once that something catastrophic has happened to me. And I cannot let my evil touch her in any way.

When I read your Chronicles, I was mildly astonished to discover that the Talamasca had turned against the Blood Hunters. My Maker had told me this, but I didn't believe it until I read it in your books.

It's still hard for me to imagine that these gentle people have broken one thousand years of neutrality in a warning against all of our kind. They seemed so proud of their benevolent history, so psychologically dependent upon a secular and kindly definition of themselves.

Obviously, I can't go to the Talamasca now. They might become my sworn enemies if I do that. They *are* my sworn enemies! And on account of my past contact, they know exactly where I live. But more significantly, I can't seek their help because you don't want it.

You and the other members of the Coven of the Articulate do not want one of us to fall into the hands of an order of scholars who are only too eager to study us at close range.

As for my red-haired Mayfair love, let me repeat that I wouldn't dream of approaching her, though I've sometimes wondered if her extraordinary powers couldn't help me to



somehow put an end to Goblin for all time. But this could not be done without my frightening her and confusing her, and I won't interrupt her human destiny as mine was interrupted for me. I feel even more cut off from her than I did in the past.

And so, except for my mortal connections, I'm alone.

I don't expect your pity on account of this. But maybe your understanding will prevent you from immediately annihilating me and Goblin without so much as a warning.

That you can find both of us I have no doubt. If even half the Chronicles are true, it's plain that your Mind Gift is without measure. Nevertheless, let me tell you where I am.

My true home is the wooden Hermitage on Sugar Devil Island, deep in Sugar Devil Swamp, in northeastern Louisiana, not far from the Mississippi border. Sugar Devil Swamp is fed by the West Ruby River, which branches off from the Ruby at Rubyville.

Acres of this deep cypress swamp have belonged to my family for generations, and no mortal ever accidentally finds his way in here to Sugar Devil Island, I'm certain of it, though my great-great-great-grandfather Manfred Blackwood did build the house in which I sit, writing to you now.

Our ancestral home is Blackwood Manor, an august if not overblown house in the grandest Greek Revival style, replete with enormous and dizzying Corinthian columns, an immense structure on high ground.

For all its huffing and puffing beauty, it lacks the grace and dignity of New Orleans homes, being a truly pretentious monument to Manfred Blackwood's greed and dreams. Constructed in the 1880s, without a plantation to justify it, it had no real purpose but to give delight to those who lived in it. The entire property - swamp, land and monstrous house - is known as Blackwood Farm.

That the house and land around it are haunted is not only legend but fact. Goblin is without a doubt the most

potent of the spirits, but there are ghosts here as well.

Do they want the Dark Blood from me? For the most part, they seem far too weak for such a possibility, but who is to say that ghosts don't see and learn? God knows that I have some accursed capacity to draw their attention and to endow them with some crucial vitality. It's been happening all my life.

Have I tried your patience? I hope to God that I have not.

But this letter may be my one chance with you, Lestat. And so I've said the things that matter to me most.

And when I reach your flat in the Rue Royale, I'll use every bit of wit and skill at my command to place this letter where no one will find it but you.

Believing in that ability, I sign my name,  
Tarquin Blackwood,  
known always as  
Quinn

Postscript.

Remember I'm only twenty-two and a bit clumsy. But I can't resist this small request. If you do mean to track me down and eradicate me, could you give me an hour's notice to say some sort of farewell to the one mortal relative I most love in all the world?

In the Vampire Chronicle called *Merrick*, you were described as wearing a coat with cameo buttons. Was that the truth or someone's fanciful embellishment?

If you wore those cameo buttons - indeed, if you chose them carefully and you loved them - then for the sake of those cameos, let me, before being destroyed, say farewell to an elderly woman of incredible charm and benevolence who loves each evening to spread out her hundreds of cameos on her marble table and examine them one by one in the light. She is my great-aunt and my teacher in all

things, a woman who has sought to endow me with all I need to live an important life.

I'm not worthy of her love now. I'm not alive now. But she doesn't know this. My nightly visits to her are cautious but nevertheless crucial to her. And should I be taken from her without warning and without some explanation, it would be a cruelty she doesn't deserve.

Ah, there is much more that I could tell you about her cameos - about the role which they have played in my fate.

But for now, let me only plead with you. Let me live, and help me destroy Goblin. Or put an end to us both.

Sincerely,  
Quinn

## TWO

FOR A LONG time after I finished the letter, I didn't move.

I sat listening to the inevitable sounds of Sugar Devil Swamp, my eyes on the pages before me, noting against my will the boring regularity of the handwriting, the muted lamps around me reflected in the marble flooring, the glass windows open to the night breeze.

All was well in my little palazzo in the swampland.

No sign of Goblin. No sense of Goblin's thirst or enmity. Nothing but that which was natural, and faraway, keen to my vampiric ears, the faint stirrings from Blackwood Manor, where Aunt Queen was just rising, with the loving help of Jasmine, our housekeeper, for a mildly eventful night. Soon the television would be going with an enchanting old black-and-white movie. *Dragonwyck* or *Laura, Rebecca* or *Wuthering Heights*. In an hour perhaps Aunt Queen would be saying to Jasmine, "Where is my Little Boy?"

But for now there was time for courage. Time to follow through.

I took the cameo out of my pocket and looked at it. A year ago, when I was still mortal - still alive - I would have had to hold it to the lamp, but not now. I could see it clearly.

It was my own head, in semi-profile, carved skillfully from a fine piece of double-strata sardonyx so that the image was entirely white and remarkably detailed. The background was a pure and shining black.

It was a heavy cameo, and excellent as to the craft. I'd had it done to give to my beloved Aunt Queen, more of a

little joke than anything else, but the Dark Blood had come before the perfect moment. And now that moment was forever past.

What did it show of me? A long oval face, with features that were too delicate – a nose too narrow, eyes round with round eyebrows and a full cupid’s-bow mouth that made me look as if I were a twelve-year-old girl. No huge eyes, no high cheekbones, no rugged jaw. Just very pretty, yes, too pretty, which is why I’d scowled for most of the photographs taken for the portrait; but the artist hadn’t carved that scowl into the face.

In fact, he’d given me a trace of a smile. My short curly hair he’d rendered in thick swirls as if it were an Apollonian halo. He’d carved my shirt collar, jacket lapel and tie with equal grace.

Of course the cameo said nothing of my height of six foot four inches, that my hair was jet black, my eyes blue, or of the fact that I was slight of build. I had the kind of long thin fingers which were very good for the piano, which I played now and then. And it was my height that told people that in spite of my all too precious face and feminine hands, I really was a young man.

And so there was this enigmatic creature in a good likeness. A creature asking for sympathy. A creature saying crassly:

“Well, think about it, Lestat. I’m young, I’m stupid. And I’m pretty. Look at the cameo. I’m pretty. Give me a chance.”

I’d have engraved the back with those words in tiny script, but the back was an oval photo case, and there was my image again in dull color, verifying the accuracy of the portrait on the other side.

There was one engraved word on the gold frame, right beneath the cameo, however: the name Quinn, in a good imitation of that routine handwriting which I had always hated so much – the left-handed one trying to be normal, I

imagine, the seer of ghosts saying, "I'm disciplined and not insane."

I gathered up the pages of the letter, reread them quickly, bristling again at my unimaginative handwriting, then folded the pages and put the cameo with them inside of a narrow brown envelope, which I then sealed.

I put this envelope in the inside breast pocket of my black blazer. I closed the top button of my white dress shirt and I adjusted my simple red silk tie. Quinn, the snappy dresser. Quinn, worthy to be a subject in the Vampire Chronicles. Quinn, dressed for begging to be allowed in.

I sat back again, listening. No Goblin. Where was Goblin? I felt an aching loneliness for him. I felt the emptiness of the night air. He was waiting for me to hunt, waiting for the fresh blood. But I had no intention of hunting tonight, even though I was faintly hungry. I was going into New Orleans. I was going, perhaps, to my death.

Goblin couldn't guess at what was happening. Goblin had never been more than a child. Goblin looked like me, yes, at every stage of my life, but he was forever the infant. Whenever he had grabbed my left hand with his right, the script had been a child's scrawl.

I leaned over and touched the remote control button on the marble desk. The torchères dimmed and slowly went out. The darkness came into the Hermitage. The sounds seemed to grow louder: the call of the night heron, the subtle movement of the rank dark waters, the scurrying of tiny creatures through the tops of the tangled cypress and gum. I could smell the alligators, who were as wary of the island as men. I could smell the fetid heat itself.

The moon was generous and gradually I made out a bit of the sky, which was a bright metallic blue.

The swamp was at its thickest here around the island - the cypresses, a thousand years old, their knobby roots surrounding the shore, their misshapen branches heavy

with trailing Spanish moss. It was as if they meant to hide the Hermitage, and perhaps they did.

Only the lightning now and then attacked these old sentinels. Only the lightning was fearless of the legends that said some evil dwelt on Sugar Devil Island: go there and you might never come back.

I'd been told about those legends when I was fifteen. And at twenty-one I heard it all repeated, but vanity and fascination had drawn me to the Hermitage, to the pure mystery of it - this strong two-story house, and the nearby inexplicable mausoleum - and now there was no real later. There was only this immortality, this brimming power which shut me off from actuality or time.

A man in a pirogue would take a good hour to navigate his way out of here, picking through the tree roots, and back to the landing at the foot of the high ground where Blackwood Manor stood so arrogant and aloof.

I didn't really love this Hermitage, though I needed it. I didn't love the grim gold-and-granite mausoleum with its strange Roman engravings, though I had to hide inside it from the sun by day.

But I did love Blackwood Manor, with the irrational and possessive love that only great houses can draw from us - houses that say, "I was here before you were born and I'll be here after you"; houses that seem a responsibility as much as a haven of dreams.

The history of Blackwood Manor had as much of a grip on me as its overweening beauty. I'd lived my whole life on Blackwood Farm and in the Manor, except for my wonderful adventures abroad.

How so many uncles and aunts had managed to leave Blackwood Manor over the years, I couldn't fathom, but they weren't important to me, those strangers who had gone North and only came home now and then for funerals. The house had me in thrall.

I was debating now. Do I go back, just to walk through the rooms again? Do I go back to seek out the large rear first-floor bedroom where my beloved Aunt Queen was just settling into her favorite chair? I did have another cameo in my jacket pocket, one expressly bought for her only nights before in New York, and I should give it to her, shouldn't I? It was a wonderful specimen, one of the finest -.

But no. I couldn't manage a partial farewell, could I? I couldn't hint that something might happen to me. I couldn't gleefully descend into mystery, into which I'd already sunk up to my eyeballs: Quinn, the night visitor, Quinn who likes dimly lighted rooms now and shies from lamps as though he suffers from an exotic disease. What good would a partial farewell do for my beloved and gentle Aunt Queen?

If I failed tonight, I would be another legend: "That incorrigible Quinn. He went deep into Sugar Devil Swamp, though everybody told him not to; he went to that accursed island Hermitage, and one night he just didn't come back."

The fact was, I didn't believe Lestat would blast me into infinity. I didn't believe he would do it without letting me tell him my story, all or at least in part. Maybe I was just too young to believe it. Maybe because I'd read the Chronicles so avidly, I felt Lestat was as close to me as I was to him.

Madness, most likely. But I was bound and determined to get as near to Lestat as I could. From where and how he kept watch over New Orleans I didn't know. When and how often he visited his French Quarter flat I didn't know either. But this letter and the gift of the onyx cameo of myself was to go to that flat tonight.

Finally I got up from the leather-and-gold chair.

I went out of the splendid marble-floored house, and with no more than thought to direct me I let myself rise from the warm earth slowly, experiencing a delicious lightness, until I could see from the cool heights far above the huge long meandering black mass of the swamp, and



the lights of the big house shining as if it were a lantern on the smooth grass.

Towards New Orleans I willed myself, using this strangest of powers, the Cloud Gift, traversing the waters of Lake Pontchartrain and moving towards the infamous town house in the Rue Royale, which all Blood Hunters knew was the house of the invincible Lestat.

“One hell of a devil,” my Maker had called him, “keeping his properties in his own name though the Talamasca is hounding him. He means to outlast them. He’s more merciful than I.”

Merciful; that was what I was counting on now. Lestat, wherever you are, be merciful. I don’t come with disrespect. I need you, as my letter will show.

Slowly I descended, down, down, into the balmy air again, a fleeting shadow to prying eyes if there were any, until I stood in the rear courtyard of the town house, near to the murmuring fountain, looking up at the curving iron stairs that led to Lestat’s rear door.

All right. I am here. So the rules have been broken. So I’m in the courtyard of the Brat Prince himself. Descriptions came to mind from the pages of the Chronicles, complex as the bougainvillea vine running rampant up the iron columns to the upstairs cast-iron railing. It was like being in a very shrine.

All around me I could hear the brash noises of the French Quarter: the clatter of restaurant kitchens, the happy voices of the inevitable tourists on the pavements. I heard the thinnest sound of the jazz blaring out of doors on Bourbon Street. I heard the creeping rumble of cars passing sluggishly in front.

The little courtyard itself was tight and beautiful; the sheer height of its brick walls caught me off guard. The glistening green banana trees were the biggest I’d ever seen, their waxy stalks buckling the purple flagstones here and there. But this was no abandoned place.

Someone had been here to clip the dead leaves from the banana groves. Someone had taken away the shriveled bananas that always wither in New Orleans before they ripen. Someone had cut back the abundant roses so that the patio itself was clear.

Even the water gurgling from the conch in the stone cherub's hand down into the basin of the fountain was fresh and clean.

All these sweet little details made me feel all the more like a trespasser, but I was too damned foolishly passionate to be afraid.

Then I saw a light shining through the rear windows above, a very dim light, as if from a lamp deep in the flat.

That did frighten me, but again the all-possessing madness in me mounted. Would I get to speak to Lestat himself? And what if, catching sight of me, he sent out the Fire Gift without hesitating? The letter, the onyx cameo, my own bitter pleas wouldn't have a chance.

I should have given Aunt Queen the new cameo. I should have grabbed her up and kissed her. I should have made a speech to her. I was about to die.

Only a perfect idiot could have been as exhilarated as I was. Lestat, I love you. Here comes Quinn to be your student and slave!

I hurried up the curving iron stairs, careful not to make a sound. And once I reached the rear balcony, I caught the distinct scent of a human being inside. A human being. What did this mean? I stopped and sent the Mind Gift before me to search out the rooms.

At once a confusing message reached me. There was a human there, no doubt of it, and he was furtive, this one, moving in haste, painfully conscious of the fact that he had no right to be where he was. And this someone, this human, knew that I was here as well.

For a moment, I didn't know what to do. Trespassing, I had caught an intruder in the act. A strange protective

feeling flooded me. This person had invaded Lestat's property. How dare he? What sort of a bumbler was he? And how did he know that I was here, and that my mind had searched his?

In fact, this strange unwelcome being had a Mind Gift that was almost as strong as mine. I sounded for his name and he yielded it up to me: Stirling Oliver, my old friend, from the Talamasca. And at the same moment, as I detected his identity, I heard his mind recognize me.

*Quinn*, he said mentally, just as if he were addressing me. But what did he know of me? It had been years since I had set eyes on Stirling. Did he sense already the change that had been worked in me? Could he tell such a thing with his quick telepathy? Dear God, I had to banish it from my own mind. There was time to get out of this, time to go back to the Hermitage and leave Stirling to his furtive investigation, time to flee before he knew just what I'd become.

Yeah, leave - and now - and let him think I'd become a common mortal reader of the Chronicles, and come back when he's nowhere in sight.

But I couldn't leave. I was too lonely. I was too hell-bent on confrontation. That was the perfect truth. And here was Stirling, and here was the entranceway perhaps to Lestat's heart.

On impulse I did the most forbidden of all things. I opened the unlocked back door of the flat and I went inside. I paused for only a breathless second in the dark elegant rear parlor, glancing at its roaring Impressionist paintings, and then I went down the corridor past the obviously empty bedrooms and found Stirling in the front room - a most formal drawing room, crowded with gilded furniture, and with its lace-covered windows over the street.

Stirling stood at the tall bookcase to the left side, and there was an open book in his hand. He merely looked at

me as I stepped into the light of the overhead chandelier.

What did he see? For the moment I didn't seek to find out. I was too busy looking at him, and realizing how much I loved him still for those times when I was the eighteen-year-old boy who saw spirits, and that he looked much the same as he had in those days - soft gray hair combed back loose from his high forehead and receding temples, large sympathetic gray eyes. He seemed no older than sixty-odd years, as if age hadn't touched him, his body still slender and healthy, tricked out in a white-and-blue seersucker suit.

Only gradually, though it must have been a matter of seconds, did I realize he was afraid. He was looking up at me - on account of my height just about everybody looks up at me - and for all his seeming dignity, and he did have plenty of that, he could see the changes in me, but he wasn't sure what had happened. He knew only that he felt instinctive and mindful fear.

Now, I am a Blood Hunter who can pass for human but not necessarily with someone as savvy as this man was. And then we had the question of telepathy, though I'd done my best to close up my mind the way my Maker had told me, that by simple will, it could be done.

"Quinn," said Stirling. "What's wrong with you?" The soft British accent took me back four and a half years in a finger snap.

"Everything's wrong with me, Stirling," I answered before I could rein myself in. "But why are you here?" Then I came right to the point like the blunderer I was. "Do you have Lestat's permission to be in this flat?"

"No," he said immediately. "I must confess I don't have it. And what about you, Quinn?" His voice was full of concern. "Why are you here?"

He shoved the book back into place on the shelf and took a step towards me, but I stepped back into the shadows of the hall.

I almost buckled on account of his kindness. But another inevitable element had come sharply into play. His sweet delectable human scent was strong, and suddenly I saw him divorced from all I knew of him. I saw him as prey.

In fact, I felt the immense impossible gulf that now divided us, and I was hungry for him, hungry as if his kindness would pour into me in his very blood.

But Stirling was no Evil Doer. Stirling wasn't game. I was losing my fledgling mind as I looked at him. My acute loneliness was driving me. My hunger was bedeviling me. I wanted both to feast on him and tell him all my woes and griefs.

"Don't come close to me, Stirling," I said, struggling to sound self-possessed. "You shouldn't be here. You have no right to be here. If you're so damned clever, why didn't you just come by day, when Lestat couldn't stop you?"

The scent of the blood was driving me crazy, that and my savage desire to close the gap between us, by murder or by love.

"I don't fully know the answer to that, Quinn," he said, his British accent formal and eloquent though his tone was not. "But you're the last person I expected to find here. Quinn, let me look at you, please."

Again, I said no. I was shaking. "Stirling, don't try to charm me with that old easy manner," I pressed on. "You might find someone else here who's a lot more dangerous to you than I am. Or don't you believe Lestat's stories? Don't tell me you think his vampires exist only in books."

"You're one of them," he said softly. He frowned but the frown cleared in a moment. "Is this Lestat's handiwork? He brought you over?"

I was amazed at his boldness, polite as it was. But then he was so much older than me, so used to a graceful authority, and I was painfully young. Again, in waves I felt the old love for him, the old need of him, and again it was fusing perfectly, and stupidly, with my thirst.

“It wasn’t Lestat’s doing,” I said. “In fact, he had nothing to do with it. I came here looking for him, Stirling, and now this has happened, this little tragedy that I’ve run into you.”

“A tragedy?”

“What else can it be, Stirling? You know who I am. You know where I live. You know all about my family at Blackwood Manor. How can I just walk out of here now that I’ve seen you and you’ve seen me?”

I felt the thirst thick in my throat. My vision was blurring. I heard myself speaking:

“Don’t try to tell me that if I let you go, the Talamasca wouldn’t come looking for me. Don’t try to tell me that you and your cohorts wouldn’t be prowling about in search of me. I know what would happen. This is god-awful, Stirling.”

His fear quickened, but he was struggling not to give in to it. And my hunger was becoming uncontrollable. If I let it go, if I let it play itself out, the act would seem inevitable, and seeming inevitable was all that conscience needed; but that just couldn’t happen, not to Stirling Oliver. I was hopelessly confused.

Before I realized what I was doing, I moved closer to him. I could see the blood in him now as well as smell it. And he made a fatal misstep. That is, he moved backwards, as if he couldn’t stop himself from doing it, and he seemed in that gesture to be more the victim than ever. That backwards step caused me to advance.

“Stirling, you shouldn’t have come here,” I said. “You’re an invader.” But I could hear the flatness of my voice in my hunger, the meaninglessness of the words. Invader, invader, invader.

“You can’t harm me, Quinn,” he said, his voice very level and reasonable, “you wouldn’t do it. There’s too much between us. I’ve always understood you. I’ve always understood Goblin. Are you going to betray all that now?”