

TRACEY O'HARA

A Dark Brethren Short Story



Dante Rising

The Birth of a Venator

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By

Tracey O'Hara



Sixteen years ago — Rural France

ANTOINETTE sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes to look around the dark bedroom. She tilted her head and listened carefully for the noise that woke her. But only sounds of the gentle spring rain pitter-pattering against the bedroom window and her little brother's soft, steady breathing beside broke the silence. Nici's arms were thrown above his head and he'd kicked the covers of his left leg. She smiled and pulled the quilt up then listened again.

Down the hall, her grandmother's snores began to rattle through the house, sounding almost as loud as Grandfather's old car. She was used to the snorting gargle the old woman made so that wouldn't have woken her.

Then it came again—a distinct knocking noise from downstairs.

Someone's here.

Suddenly she was fully awake. Little bubbles of happiness tickled the inside of her tummy as the old clock downstairs chimed two. *After midnight.* It was her birthday. Her sixth birthday. And Papa had promised her a new puppy.

A knocking noise came again.

Papa's home.

Now, if she could just reach him before Mama caught her out of bed. Papa would let her have the puppy. She knew he would. And he'd let her stay up—maybe even share a cup of warm milk.

She quickly clamped her hand over her mouth to catch the giggle before it escaped, but could only muffle it instead. Nici murmured something in his sleep, and kicked off the covers again. He lay sprawled on his back with arms and legs everywhere.

Should I wake him? Another excited giggle rose up her throat and she tightened her hand over her mouth.

No - he'll just get us caught. Besides she wanted Papa all to herself. Especially if he had a new puppy.

Antoinette crept out from under the covers and froze when Nici moaned. But he just rolled over and stuck his thumb back into his mouth, still asleep.

Her bare feet hit the floor and landed on something soft. The fabric body of her baby doll she called Dolly lay under her foot. She bent and gathered the toy into her arms.

“Poor Dolly,” she whispered, smoothing down the tangle of blonde curls so like her own before kissing the cold plastic face. She tucked the doll to her chest and tiptoed across the cold wooden floor and out into the hall.

Mama will be so cross if she catches me out of bed. But it was worth the risk. Smiling, Antoinette pictured her father. “*Marianna, my love, don't be mad. Come Lishka*” he'd say, using her pet name. “*Come sit on Papa's knee and have some milk.*”

And Mama would smile that special smile—the one she kept just for

Papa. It was Antoinette's favorite. Mama was always more beautiful when Papa was around.

As she passed by her grandmother's room, the bedsprings squeaked and the snoring stopped. Antoinette held her breath, praying for Grammie not to wake. Finally, after a gargled snort, the snoring began again. Antoinette let out a huge sigh and continued along the hall.

Her mother's voice carried to the top of the stairs. "*Oui, Monsieur*, please come in."

Her heart sank.

It's not Papa.

Of course it wasn't. He would never have knocked on the front door.

She sat down in the shadows at the top of the stairs, tucking her nightgown around her cold bare legs and hugging Dolly to her chest. It was late—too late for visitors.

Who could it be?

Her mother stood by the front door, speaking to someone Antoinette couldn't see.

A man she'd never seen before shook out his coat and crossed the threshold, water and mud dripping onto the stone floor. Antoinette sucked back her breath instinctively. Grammie would've clicked her tongue and shaken her head if she saw. The man would be in so much trouble. But Grammie was asleep and the little girl's chest tightened at the thought. Antoinette hugged Dolly closer.

The man was tall—much taller than Papa. His hair hung in a pale wet mess, hiding his face.

“You’re so kind.” He stopped looking around the room and turned to her mother. “*Mademoiselle* is it?”

Something about him was not right. He didn’t look in her direction, but Antoinette felt a chill sweep over her.

“*Madame*, actually,” her mother replied. “*Madame* Petrescu.”

“Petrescu? That’s not a French name is it?” The man talked funny, but she knew English. Mama had taught her since she was little. Her Grandfather came from England.

“*Non, Monsieur*. My husband...he is Romanian. You are American, *oui?*” Mama waved him further into the room.

“I guess you could say that. I’m on my way to Paris, or at least I was until my car broke down.”

A shiver ran up Antoinette’s spine. He lied. He made her want to run and hide. She shrank further into the shadows.

“It is not a good night to be caught out in the weather, *Monsieur*. The rain may be light, but it still carries the touch of winter,” Mama said as she handed him a towel.

He nodded and dried his wet hair. For the first time Antoinette could see his face which was not bad to look at, but there was something about his eyes that reminded her of the crazy fox Papa shot last summer because it had something called *rabies*.

“I don’t want to intrude any longer than I have to, Madam. If you’ll just show me to your telephone I’ll be out of your hair as soon as possible.”

For a brief second, Antoinette felt his cold grey eyes settle on her

then move on. She must've imagined it — he couldn't possibly have seen her — not up here in the dark. But she couldn't shake the feeling he had known she was there from the moment he walked in the door.

Antoinette moved as far back into the concealing shadows as she could while her mother showed him to the phone.

“Can I offer you something to drink, *Monsieur*?” her mother asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

“That would be divine,” he said. His voice sounded...different and a strange smile tilted his mouth on an odd angle. A puzzled expression flickered across Mama's face, and it was gone before Antoinette could be sure. But for a brief second Mama had looked scared. Fear was not something Antoinette was used to seeing on her mother's face.

“Well...um...I will get you something.” Mama's voice shook. “ot *chocolat* per'aps?”

Monsieur ran his tongue over his lips and looked at Mama the way the barn cat looked at a mouse — just before he pounced. “That would be... lovely.”

Mama left the room as *Monsieur* picked up the phone and dialed. “It's me. I'm here...no, it shouldn't take too long...okay, I'll meet you in Paris when I'm done.”

Mama came back into the room with a tray.

“Yes, that's right, I'm at the nearby farmhouse...” The man's voice rose slightly. “Thank you.” He hung up the phone and smiled at Mama.

“I will get some more sugar — perhaps you like it sweet?” Mama said, her eyes darting around the room.

“No need—” the stranger’s hand shot out and grabbed her mother by the wrist, “you look sweet enough.”

The tray fell to the floor with a shattering crash, sending the scalding liquid over the man’s leg though he didn’t even flinch.

“What are you doing *Monsieur*? Please, my husband will be ‘ome very soon.” Mama’s voice cracked. “No — please *Monsieur* no — *non, s’il vous plaît.*”

He didn’t seem to hear her mother’s pleas and began humming a vaguely familiar tune. This seemed to frighten Mama even more. And then he started to dance, dragging Mama with him. Slowly he twirled around the room, humming and dancing, dancing and humming. Mama hung on his arm like one of Antoinette’s rag dolls.

When he bent her into a low dip, he loosened the pins holding her mother’s bun in place. Antoinette watched as Mama’s pale hair flowed out and swept the floor. The *monsieur* bent closer and ran his tongue across Mama’s chest, which rose and fell so quickly. Mama closed her eyes tightly and bit her on her lower lip.

He stood straight, taking her mother with him then elegantly flung her away, keeping a firm grip on her hand. Antoinette watched in horror as her mother tried to pull away before he yanked her back against his chest, spinning her so they both faced the same direction. Her mother’s loose hair flung across her face with the force of the move and Antoinette heard her panting breaths from where she sat. Antoinette wanted to run to her and hit that man until let her mother go. But she couldn’t. He was too big and she was just a little girl.

The man had Mama pinned against him, and no matter how much

she struggled, she couldn't get away. Slowly he pulled away the long hair, uncovering her ear. He whispered something, her mother's eyes widened, searching the shadows where Antoinette sat. The man held his hand out and Antoinette leaned forward slightly, just enough to bring her into the light and her mother's sight. She hadn't meant to move, it was like some unseen hand pulled her.

Antoinette felt the dampness on her cheek, her hot tears cooling on her cold skin as she watched the man run his long fingers across her mother's throat.

Mama no! Oh how she wished she could give voice to the silent screams in her mind.

Her heart beat wildly in her chest, but she remained frozen - watching. No matter how much she wanted to flee, she couldn't move, not even to open her mouth. Helpless, so helpless. She tried desperately to cry out as icy fingers clawed across her mind.

Mama, what's happening? Where's Papa?

Monsieur raised his gaze to where Antoinette sat. Their eyes locked.

"Ah, *ma chère*," he said in her mother's ear. "Make one sound—one little peep—and she dies."

Mama's eyes widened, and shook her head, her gaze never leaving Antoinette's face. He ran his tongue up the side of Mama's face as he took her hand and pressed it against the bulge in the front of his trousers.

The stranger opened his mouth wide. Something long and white gleamed from within. Her mother gave a sigh and bit her lip as his mouth descended on her throat.

Run, Antoinette's mind screamed, run for your life.

But one look into his mocking, lifeless eyes, Antoinette knew he was playing with her — and he liked it. He would never let her run.

Grammie snorted loudly behind her, giving Antoinette a start, but it didn't release the hold the stranger had over her. She could only watch her mother's torment. Then he stopped. Antoinette's body stood on its own, her mind struggling to gain control as she descended one step. Mama's eyes widened, the terror in her expression deepened and she mouthed, "Run". But Antoinette couldn't.

A thin trickle of scarlet snaked a path across her mother's pale skin and Antoinette's gaze followed it. He saw it too and wiped the trail with the tip of his finger, then looked at Antoinette as he brought it to his mouth. Closing his eyes he savored the taste. With a broad grin, he reached his hand behind his back and returned holding a knife, his open eyes now fever bright. "Remember what I said – one sound and your daughter's dead."

Mama's mouth opened to scream but closed it again as he slid the knife across her mother's chest and dropped the tip to slice just above her left breast. Blood welled along the cut, he seemed mesmerized by it. He cut again. And still Mama didn't cry out. Antoinette's mind screamed what her mouth and mother couldn't.

Then the smile slipped from his face and he grew a little sad. "If I only had more time," he said. And with those words he drew blade across Mama's throat and loosened his hold on her.

Antoinette watched her mother crumple, her hands fluttering to her throat, trying to stop the flood of dark red blood. It flowed out so fast and

her mother grew pale until she fell face first on the floor, a dark pool forming around her head, soaking into her beautiful pale hair.

Noooooooo.

He smiled again. Vicious and hungry. He ran his tongue along the red stained blade. The smile never reached his grey-blue eyes which were the same color as the lake on a chilly winter's day.

"Well now, Little-one," he said, his voice was just as cold as that lake.

Her stomach clenched, a bitter, burning taste rose against the back of her throat and her heart constricted with each word he uttered.

"You shouldn't be out of bed, should you? Let me sing you a lullaby." He slowly started to advance toward her.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he gripped the banister and placed his foot on the bottom step. And started to sing to the tune he'd hummed while dancing. "*Hush little baby.*"

Her thundering heart sped up as the wooden step creaked under his weight as he lifted his other foot to the next step. "*Don't say a word.*"

He continued to sing as he climbed another. "*Mama's gonna buy you...*"

He looked over to her mother's lifeless body, then turned and shrugged his shoulders. "*...a mocking bird.*"

Her almost forgotten Dolly slipped from her fingers and tumbled down the stairs in slow motion, turning end over end, the pale curls bouncing.

Dolly!

The toy came to rest at his feet.

“And if that mocking bird don’t sing,” he sang then his lips pulled away to reveal — fangs — long and white as the doll flew into his hand as if my magic.

For a second her blood froze and her heart stopped beating. Only three steps away...now two. He held out the doll and her hand reached out — she couldn’t stop it — closing around Dolly’s leg. Something warm and wet pooled around her chilly feet and his smile deepened as the strong smell of urine stung her nose. She’d wet herself like a little baby.

“Papa’s gonna buy you —”

Twin headlights swept through the front windows. The spell broke she turned toward them and she felt a tug on her arm. When she turned back — he was gone. And the headless body of her doll dangled in her outstretched hand.

Her fingers slid open, the weight of the broken toy dropped and then she turned. Fear gave her feet wings as she ran to her room and slid under the bed, curling into a tight ball on the cold hardwood floor where she hid.

And waited.

Waited for him to follow, waited for him to find her, waited for him to pull her from under the bed and...

Her heart beat faster, no matter how much she willed it to stop. He would hear. He would find her. Pulling herself further under the bed, she tried to make herself invisible.

A dreadful sound tore through the house and her heart broke. Even her young mind recognized the pain and torment in that cry.

Then all hell broke loose – Grandpa yelled, Uncle cursed and Grammie screamed and cursed.

Antoinette covered her ears with her hands, trying to block out the chaos.

Papa! Where are you, Papa?

“Marianna, Marianna, my baby, my baby –” Grammie’s voice screeched. “Is all your fault – you filthy gypsy pig. You leave now – you leave and never come back.” Her Grandmother let forth a string of garbled French swearwords.

Nici started to cry from above. She wanted to get out and comfort him, but she was too scared the bad man would find her.

Heavy footsteps thundered up the stairs. Booted feet stomped to the bedside. She rolled in a tighter ball. Tears soaking her hair as she stifled the scream building in her throat.

“Nicolae – Antoinette –” Her father’s frantic voice called from above her bed.

“Papa,” she croaked. The sound of her voice surprised her — it’d returned. Then the scream escaped.

He dropped to his knees. Rough hands pulled her from her hiding place; warm arms wrapped around her; his bristled face showered her with kisses. She was safe. But something hollow remained in the pit of her stomach.

“Mama –” Antoinette cried.

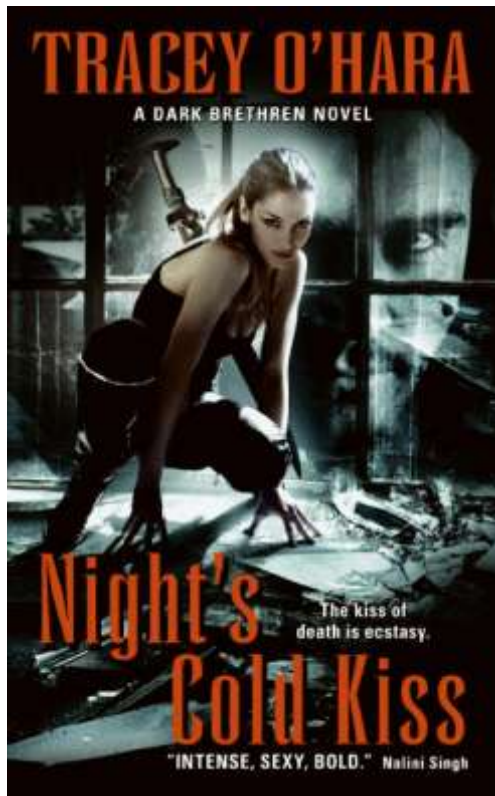
Her father's body started to shake and he held her tighter, almost crushing her. Sitting on the bed Papa scooped up the now terrified and howling Nici. Back and forth he rocked them in his embrace as he whispered her mother's name over and over again.

Antoinette's tears dried. She turned to look out into the darkness pressing against the window. *He* was out there. The monster man.

One day she would find him.

And kill him.

One day.



Now read more about Antoinette in
NIGHT'S COLD KISS

The first Dark Brethren Novel

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For centuries war raged between the humans and Aeternus vampires—until courageous efforts on both sides forged a fragile peace.

But the rogue Necrodreniacs will never be controlled—addicted as they are to the death-high . . . and bloody chaos.

Since witnessing the murder of her mother, Antoinette Petrescu has burned with fiery hatred for the vampire race—even for Christian Laroque, the noble, dangerously handsome Aeternus who rescued her. Now an elite Venator, Antoinette must reluctantly accept Christian's help to achieve her vengeance—even as he plots to use the beautiful, unsuspecting warrior as bait to draw out the bloodthirsty *dreniacs*.

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