

An excerpt from:

AND DARKER MY WRATH

By

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The Townshend Vampire Trilogy

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CHAPTER ONE

Brad Temple flashed his torch briefly along the base of the Townshend family mausoleum. The night was silent with no moon to light the edges of the cold marble columns. No stars cast a soft glow on the bronze grill before them. No shadows etched the ground they stood on. His fingers probed the flower urn at the left side of the entry. At the grubby bottom he located a key and fished it out. Even though it was late March, he wore no gloves.

“My hands are sweating. Here it is.” His voice was hoarse. “That groundskeeper came through for you,” he said to his mother. “I didn’t think he’d really leave you the key.”

“I had to tell him what we were planning. Then I leaned on him. He’d already heard some of the story, and he said he didn’t want Monty getting out of his coffin, either. I don’t know why he believed me when I said Monty was a vampire. Maybe it wasn’t the first time he’d heard about it. I didn’t want to ask him.”

Jan Temple stood behind Brad with a hammer in her left hand and a freshly sharpened oak stake in her right. She knew his knees were shaking as he contemplated what they were going to do. Hers were not, but Jan was more frightened than she’d ever been in her life, even on the night six months earlier when she first plunged a solid silver dagger into the back of the vampire whose mausoleum they were now about to enter. She had known then that the effect of the dagger might be only temporary, and it had remained at the back of her mind ever since. Several times she’d tried to engage Brad in the project, but he’d resisted. Knowing it was inevitable, she’d imagined tonight’s confrontation again and again. Unable to face it earlier, she’d put it off until the last possible moment herself. Even now she was rethinking it.

“We should’ve come in daylight,” she said. “Why did I ever think I wanted to enter his mausoleum at night?” Her watch showed it was just past 1:30.

“No way to be subtle about it in daylight, and no way to keep it secret from Jennifer if we’d tried to slip away before she went to bed.”

Jennifer Martin was Brad's fiancée, left behind sleeping at Bridle Falls, a gentleman's equestrian estate forty miles away. Once this was finished, Brad and Jan would drive back and retire to their rooms. In the morning they'd act as if they'd had a solid night's sleep, instead of none at all, because they'd never be able to fall asleep again after this, and then try to appear rested for the wedding that afternoon. In the weeks before Jan killed Monty Townshend the previous fall, Jan had seen Jennifer develop an unnerving weakness for his monstrous attentions, even as she and Brad were planning their wedding. Tonight's visit to Monty's coffin was insurance for the future.

"It's just so...I can't even think of a word for it," Jan said. "But understand this, Brad, if it comes to that point, let me take the hit—you get out if you can. I've already lived most of my life, but today's your wedding day." Feeling like she was in a supporting role in a B movie, she made a useless gesture, invisible in the darkness, but was unable to go on as her voice broke. Jan was fifty-six. She wondered how she could even be saying that—it was what her late husband, Harry, would have said. He'd always been there for her and Brad, until his death five years before. All her life she'd found the tasks of parenting, if not always easy, at least possible. How was it, now that Brad was thirty and mostly beyond her help, she was facing an event, an *attack*, that she thought would probably not succeed, although it could well be the most important challenge of her parenting life?

"Good plan, Mom. I'll just let him kill you while I run away. You have no idea how weird that sounds. Jesus! I can't think about it. We'll get through this together, OK? Let's get it over with." Brad slid the key into the lock. With a small protesting noise of metal against rarely used metal, it turned, and he swung the ornate bronze grill outward. The groundskeeper who'd left them the key had told Jan it opened the frosted glass door they now faced as well. "Here we go," said Brad.

Jan had found herself the engineer, as she thought of it, on this project. Brad had been present when she stabbed Monty Townshend in Brad and Jennifer's apartment, but later Brad had undergone his normal slow process of digesting what happened, one that drove the people around him crazy. This process was always offstage, always simmering as if beneath a cast-iron lid. When it happened at all, he would confess his thoughts at breakfast, but not always. Jan had often wondered, as he grew up, what his more overt

dramas might be. They never showed on his face, but often did in the way his knees moved. Occasionally he'd slam a book down on the dining room table, and once, when he was thirteen, he'd kicked the dog. Now he faced the most powerful individual Jan had ever met. Of course, she thought, Monty is dead. That should have made her feel better, but it didn't.

Brad gripped the sculpted handle of the frosted glass door and pushed it inward with no sound. Jan never expected him to say what he felt at a moment like this, and Brad didn't disappoint her. As for herself, she could only have said she was petrified. They walked inside the tomb with a step so quiet it wouldn't wake the dead.

Brad's hands stroked the inner edge of the doorframe, searching for a switch.

"They'd never have lighting in here, would they?"

Jan scanned the shadowy interior, but under the black sky, saw nothing. "Why would they need it? They're all dead," I hope, she thought. What if Monty's eyes were open when Brad lifted the coffin lid, his dark pupils boring into her with that ironic expression he'd always had, reducing her resolve to putty? The dryness in her mouth was like fine sand. She knew she'd choke if she tried to swallow.

Brad switched on the torch and a groan escaped his throat. "There must be twenty of them in here."

Caskets lined the shelves of all four walls. From their shape, some were obviously antique.

"Let's just do this," she said. "I feel like I'm going to faint. Look for a nameplate." Jan stood behind him. They had only one torch and she didn't want to stand alone in the pulsing darkness.

Brad started in an alcove on the right. It held a wooden coffin covered with dust. The paneled top had fractured at the toe on one corner. Or was it rotted? Chewed? The moved torch moved closer along the edge of the lid, looking for a nameplate. Jan leaned over his shoulder, her fists pressed together, the mallet and stake gripped under her armpits.

"Look at that," she whispered. Her face masked with horror, she turned away. The side of the coffin was stained with runners of a dried liquid, brown in color over the lighter wood, as if the contents had bubbled up and seeped over the edge. Jan's stomach

turned violently. From deeper within the mausoleum she thought she heard a scraping sound, but it was muffled by her pounding heart.

Brad shuddered and backed away, going from one coffin to another, scanning the front edges. At the fifth, bronze with a curious mottled patina on its bronze surface, he stopped. Unlike the others, no cobwebs draped it. He shone the flashlight on the copper nameplate.

Montague Eldridge Townshend

1877-1934

RIP

Before he could read it aloud to her, Jan thrust the stake and the hammer into his hands. “I can’t do this, Brad, I really can’t. Sorry. Here, I’ll lift the lid, and then you pound it in fast, with one blow if you can. Oh my god, I can’t even look while you do it. Hurry!” Her voice was stiff with tension.

Brad gave her the torch and she shone it on the edge of the lid. She couldn’t bear to look at his face, either. Gripping the torch with her thumb and palm, she slid eight fingers under the edge of the lid and lifted. It was not locked, and began to rise immediately. Jan turned her head to one side, feeling her face twisted into a grimace invisible in the darkness. Better that Brad couldn’t see it.

As the lid rose, the torch partly lit the interior. Brad gasped.

“It’s empty! Monty’s gone!”

Jan exhaled explosively, slamming it down again with all the force she could muster. She heard the latch engage, and her first reaction was joy and relief that they wouldn’t have to deal with Monty, dead or undead, again.

“Shit!” said Brad. “Do you know what that means? He could be back at Bridle Falls with Jennifer while we’re just standing here!” They ran for the door.

“What fools he’s made of us,” she said bitterly as she locked the grill again behind them and dropped the key into the flowerpot. They rushed to the car. “He must have guessed we’d be coming. Just once I’d like to be a step ahead of him.”

They had barely driven out of the cemetery’s main gate before Jan raised the issue that was on both their minds. “I don’t think we should wake Jennifer and tell her, OK? It’ll only frighten her on her wedding day. It would be a complete distraction, and we don’t know that Monty’s at Bridle Falls. He probably doesn’t even know you’re getting married. Don’t you think?” She touched his shoulder. “Between the two of us we can look out for her. I’m just considering what’s best for Jennifer.”

Brad said nothing for a while, pretending to watch the road as if it were the future, which was equally as dark. From the side Jan could see the grim set to his mouth. His lips had never been full, and when deep in thought, he tended to compress them into a paper-thin straight line. They were nearly at the highway intersection beyond the northern edge of Kenniston before he spoke, his voice heavy with resignation.

“You think Jennifer will go away with him if he shows up, don’t you?” When she didn’t respond, he glanced over at her. “Now we’ll have to kill him again. He’ll be stronger now; he’ll be expecting it this time. He knows that if we can drop him again, we’ll stake him properly, and he won’t be back.”

Kill him again, Jan repeated to herself. How strong was he now? The first time had been the most withering, mind-wrenching thing she’d ever done in her life, and soon they would have to repeat it. This was exactly what Jan had already been thinking. Maybe she could get a little more support from Brad this time; it had started out that way at the mausoleum.

“Slow down a little through these curves,” she said, quietly. “What if a deer jumps out from the darkness? It would scare the hell out of us.”

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