

An Excerpt from:

AND DARK MY DESIRE

Volume I of the Townshend Vampire Trilogy

by

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“To confront the evil within us we must first embrace it.”

—Lionel Townshend (1851-1931 or 3)

San Miguel Allende Books

CHAPTER ONE

Monty Townshend had last entertained a serious thought about personal grooming in 1934. His fingernails were now five or six inches long, and layered, it seemed, like successive strata formed on the surface of a pearl, to a thickness of more than a quarter of an inch. He knew this from touch. Monty hadn't seen them in decades, nor had anyone else.

For the millionth time or more, his foot traced its weary track on the perimeter of the box he lay in. Nothing ever changed—was that why they called it eternity? As he turned onto his side, the eroded toe of his shoe traced the bare metal where the fabric had worn away long ago, the way an animal in a zoo rubbed the paint off the sides of its cage endlessly circling in search of escape.

Suddenly Monty felt abrupt and real motion, a concussion, a rude thump against the passive breast of the earth. It came from nearby, although how close it was could only be conjecture. The soil around him did not communicate movement readily. It was compacted, but had no grain, no structure.

There it was again, but no sound accompanied it. No sound had ever reached him. Did his ears even work anymore? He thought of it like being in a mine after a collapse, beneath thousands of feet of shattered rock. No amount of screaming or lamentation at the surface could ever be heard by him, and that was their idea. Eternal separation. Isolation. Almost immediately after awakening he had stopped trying to lift the lid of the box. There must have been many tons of earth resting on it.

Maybe what he was sensing was only the impact of a meteor strike a hundred yards away. Did it leave a smoldering trail though the darkened sky? Day and night, darkness and light, none held any meaning for a man long dead and buried. Monty turned onto his back, arranging his shredded suit jacket beneath him. For a man who had loved to party, and, given enough champagne, could dance nonstop into the small hours of the night, this hiatus had been hard to take.

A third impact shook him. This time it was almost like a sound. He felt an emotion akin to hope, more than mere curiosity. Whatever was happening was *nearby*. After inhabiting a new definition of solitary confinement for seventy-seven years, this was news. Until this moment nothing else had even existed in the same motionless silence in which Monty was suspended.

Suddenly, in a shearing squeal, his box was thrown violently to the left, the end above his head scraped with a deafening sound. He was slammed to one side, then back. A thread of light, the width of a single hair, snaked across his chest. Amazed, he thrust the long nail of his forefinger into it, then his hand, seeing a vivid yellow arc trace the contour of his knuckle. It was like an act of creation. Twisting, nearly weeping with amazement, he saw a blinding luminous crack at the upper corner of his upholstered bonze box.

Beyond bloomed the brilliance of the day.

Kenniston, Wisconsin, needed some progress. An old river town of about 100,000 souls, little development had spurred it in forty years. The city fathers thought of it as coasting for a bit, but not stagnating, nothing like that, and some on the city council claimed it was only an economic timeout. Eventually, most people came to believe that any construction was good, and more would be better. Roads widened with state funds meant more cars, and more cars meant more people. More people meant growth, a sacred word, one uttered with reverence in the chapel of Commerce.

At the edge of the cemetery hillside where Monty Townshend had been for so many years lying more in boredom than in rest, the bulldozer, the engine of growth, smoothed a level bed for the widening roadway. With no warning it scraped something startling, a metallic container embedded in the raw earth at the edge of the cut, an object that did not belong there. The driver brought the vehicle to a stop, turning the blade aside, and jumped out, scratching his head at what he saw. A sewer pipe he would have understood, but not this.

“Damn it,” he said, throwing his Milwaukee Brewers hat forcefully into the dirt at his feet. He was looking at bright metal, now freshly gleaming in places like a new penny. It was the badly scraped, but suddenly shining, bronze end of an expensive coffin.

This meant a work stoppage, an event only the union usually advocated. The excavator would have forms to fill out, questions to answer. The company gave standby pay for situations like this, but it wasn’t the same. There was a state deadline to meet on

their contract, and penalties for delay. The machine operator pulled out his cell phone and punched the office number.

“We’ve got a situation down here behind Pioneer Cemetery,” he said. “I don’t know why this particular casket isn’t in a concrete box six feet under, or why it’s now buried twenty feet down in this end of the cemetery, but you better get someone the hell out here right away. I’m lucky I didn’t rip it open. If that’d happened, where would we be?”

The grounds-keeping crew’s well-used pickup arrived forty-seven minutes later. Aboard was Alan Bates, a driver, and a helper with two shovels.

Half an hour was required for them to extract the casket, caked with a thick layer of moist clay soil, from the hillside, and load it into the back of the truck with the help of the bulldozer operator. A tarp soon covered the top and sides of it, but it was too small to conceal the ends. Alan Bates decided it was close enough. The public had no need to know what had happened, and they weren’t likely to recognize the dirt-caked end of a coffin. The scraped end was turned toward the cab. By the time the pickup pulled into the equipment building, it would nearly be quitting time, and therefore someone else’s problem.

Alan Bates and the other grounds crewman had not allowed for Jan and Brad Temple, mother and son, to be paused for a turn at the main gate of Pioneer Cemetery. From the oncoming lane, a black pickup turned in ahead of them. As Jan Temple pulled in behind it, she realized she was looking at the end of a mud-caked coffin behind the cab.

“Look at that,” she said, shaking her head.

Brad was staring off to the right at the polished granite construction of the arch over the gate they passed through.

“I know. It’s the Beaux Arts style,” he said, always the architect, and at thirty, getting more authoritative about his trade. “This entry must have been redone around the turn of the century. They would have taken down a Victorian enclosure from fifty or sixty years earlier, probably limestone and cast iron.”

“Brad, I mean the coffin in the pickup ahead of us.”

He turned to face the front. “What kind of funeral is this? I didn’t think they did low-budget services here.”

“Looks more like they dug somebody up,” she said. “Kind of sloppy, don’t you think? Not what we paid for when we buried your dad here. I don’t want to come by

some day and find him being hauled around in the back of a groundskeeper's truck, do you? I think that's creepy. What's going on here?"

"But they're bringing the coffin *in* from outside," Brad said. "It must have been buried somewhere else."

This made no sense to Jan. With no more dignity than if it were delivering a load of refuse to the incinerator the pickup threaded its way through the narrow lanes. Unthinkingly, she turned to follow, knowing there could be no explanation that would justify what she was seeing. She was surprised how much it disturbed her. The rows of graves ended, followed by a buffer zone of open grass and oak trees. Beyond, surrounding the groundskeeper's facility, stood the tall cyclone fence with two rows of barbed wire at the top. The pickup rolled into the compound and entered the utility building through a sliding metal door. A man in a gray coverall got out and pushed the door closed. Inviting no questions, he didn't turn to look at them as they waited outside.

"I wonder if it came from somewhere around that highway construction?" Jan said. This was as much as she could do to put a good face on it. She turned the car around and drove back to the graves, heading for that of her late husband, Harry. She found it on a gentle slope near the back of the cemetery and parked nearby. Brad retrieved a bouquet of marigolds from the back seat and placed them on his father's grave. Flush with the grass, Harry's marker was a simple polished granite tablet marking the date of his death five years earlier.

The August afternoon reminded Jan of the day Harry was buried, his sixtieth birthday. They came once a year at this time. The same thought came into her mind that she always had as she looked at his stone—disappointment that they hadn't shared a long retirement. His was a life interrupted. Still in his prime mentally, he would have been sixty-five now, ten years older than she was. Behind her disappointment still lurked the anger of his loss.

She had kept trim, with graying hair kept short and uncurled. Today she wore jeans with a white shirt covered by a cardigan sweater she found she didn't need. This time of year in western Wisconsin, so near the St Louis River, she never knew what the afternoons would be like. If the sky clouded over, they could change quickly as fall approached.

From beyond the top of the hill, where the highway cut fell away sharply, almost vertically, to the roadbed, came the rumble of earth-moving equipment. Several sections of the high wrought-iron fence that backed the cemetery for more than a century and a half had been removed when the highway department sheared off the rear corner of the property for the road widening below. Two mausoleums of the town's founding families

had been dismantled and reassembled farther down the slope, closer to Harry Temple's grave. Simpler graves had been moved as well. A few people grumbled about eternal rest, but raised no serious protest. The descendants of the relocated ancestors were trust-fund babies now, quiescent in their country club bars, tucked into their rambling Lake Benton summer cottages sixty miles out of town. Most spent their winters in Florida or California. They hadn't been prominent in local government for a long time, since the family businesses had been sold and their money moved to New York.

Highways, on the other hand, possessed the quality of inevitability, of progress, in the city of Kenniston.

"I hate the noise of that equipment," Jan said. "This is supposed to be a quiet place." But she rarely had any useful thoughts to disturb there.

"Dad can't hear it, but it's movement, you know? This economy needs help. You'd look at it differently if you had to do business here like I do."

His mother didn't address this directly. She knew that in the current depressed condition of the economy, the small architectural firm Brad worked for was constantly scrambling for work. If anyone was let go, it would be her son, since he'd been the last one hired.

"I always wonder what Harry might have gotten into if he hadn't died so suddenly," she said, moving her fingers over the letters of his name. "He had that kind of mind that was always searching. I often wished he'd brought me into it more. I had some issues about that, but we never had the opportunity to resolve them before he died."

"And I always thought he wouldn't die until I was much older, like sixty," said Brad with a compressed look to his mouth. "He'd have a long illness, and we'd all have time to prepare for it. Instead, *he* was sixty. I had questions I wanted to ask him. He was starting to treat me like a grownup, telling me strange things about what he was looking at. I didn't understand all of it, but some of it, I did. I liked the quirkiness of it. There were conversations we could have had."

"Well, maybe he would have drawn you into it, eventually," Jan said doubtfully.

"He probably thought you didn't care about it. As a teacher, paranormal events weren't your thing. Did you ever ask him to make you part of it?"

"Right after I retired, but we never really got into anything. Two months later he was dead. Some of his records came from material he originally gathered when he was still a priest, and that was a mixed bag for him. I didn't know him then, but he was always sensitive about leaving the Catholic Church. Not many people knew that about him."

"Have you gotten into his stuff yet? I know we've had this conversation before, and I'm not pushing you about it."

“No, but now I’m thinking about it again. You have no idea how intimidating that office of his can be. It’s the last of your dad’s affairs I have to deal with, and I still haven’t been able to.”

“So take your time, then. What’s driving your thoughts about it now?”

The equipment noise started up again and she waited a moment before answering.

“Well, two days ago I received another offer. That’s started me thinking about the office again. I couldn’t sell his collections without going through them, but I think it’s time I let go of it. Maybe you could help me if I went up there and tackled it. Jennifer could come too, you know. I feel like I should know, at least, that there was no great discovery in them if I decide to sell it all off.”

Jan Temple paused and looked into Brad’s face. Like his father, he was just under average height and broad in the chest, but he had Jan’s dark, thick hair, with a widow’s peak she lacked.

“That was his turf,” she went on, folding her arms as she took a step back from the grave. “Sometimes, in the evenings, especially in the winter when the house is sealed up against the wind and the drifting snow, I feel like I can still sense him up there, working, shuffling through his papers. His office chair would creak when he leaned to the side. I don’t remember which side, I was so rarely in that room with him, but I still hear it now and then. Isn’t that odd? Sometimes for a moment it’s almost comforting, but mostly not. I’m sure I’m imagining it.”

“That would fit, though, wouldn’t it? After all that research on the spooky side of life, and then Dad’s still up there after he dies, and the research goes on. It’s unfinished business for him.” Brad shook his head as he stared down at the grave marker.

“Your dad would never have called it spooky.”

“What did he call it?”

“I don’t think he needed a name for it. The subjects were too diverse. Harry didn’t like to generalize.”

Above the crest of the hill, a high beeping noise of machinery backing up came down to them again on the wind.

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