

SHADOWS AT THE HAMPTONS

By

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"How much time left?" Harris squinted at the solemn building across the high, iron bars of its outer fence. Holding his focus for a moment he whispered under the cloth mask, "under six minutes...my friend." The dark clad figure that knelled in front of him kept on tinkering with two sheets of argent metal, in a meticulous pace, unperturbed by the reply. It rose up from the lush ground and held one of the shiny squares over a small, blackened clamp attached to a bar, well above their heads. Harris took notice of it as it contrasted with the glow of a rectangular window in the upper floors of the mansion, one of the few still lit, and wondered how could a mind think that type of idea at a moment like this. "That may be too high." he let out while his hands across fence aimed a tiny rod towards the metal sheet. A rasping voice returned, "It's perfect. The beam," and was followed by a quick gaze down to him. Harris nodded and pressed the rod against a black box secured on the stone trim that supported the iron perimeter. A reddish dot glided up the folds of his companion's clothes and stopped short of the silvery screen, punctuating the sheathed fist that still held to its edge. He looked at the slender figure and quickly back at his target then turning to the eyes again. "Disconnect that already. We are delayed as it is." The wrinkles of the mask receded in what he recognized to be Emily's signature grin, always uncovering the mischievous drive that ruled her world. "Not us, this is going to make headlines." He glanced at the open yard before the solid mass of brick and stone that was the Hampton's residence, "What worries me is the nature of the headline, hurry up." Harris contemplated the feline grace with which his companion climbed the towering iron bars and then drew his sight towards the sound of a dog barking in the distance. "They must be rounding the opposite corner, are we set?" He noticed her nod. Harris' fingers rubbed the prod, awaiting the word. She flipped her legs horizontally, pushing against one iron pole, supporting her torso with a hand grasping the curved, spiked end of another bar. Hovering little above the rim of the fence, the second metal sheet angled in its support under her control while her hanging hand manipulated the lower square. "Go." Harris exhaled and moved the beam into the lower one, by intuition directing its point to the middle of the surface. The dot disappeared as if engulfed in the shining of the metal. He could not see from his angle if it hit the receptor. Emily's turned towards him, "I told you. Perfect." He quickly looked at her hand, swiftly turning the higher sheet into an oblique angle. The security infra-red beam diverted to the endless sky.

"You first." Harris climbed the fence, struggling a moment with its clawed top. He loosened the grip, slid down the other side. He knelled, looking at her across the bars. "Be careful with the IR, it's very tight up there." Her eyes thinned by her whispering grin, "Ha, if only you didn't eat like a diplodocus." He moved his head back, straightening the spine.

"Why, it's not me who depletes the chocolate supplies. I stopped blaming Susan after sixteen but I have the suspicion that it was you all along, friend."

"You'll never know, and I don't ever gain weight." She fluttered her eyelashes. "Besides, she preys on it as much as I do, even now that she is a flirt."

"Those boys won't stop over a few zits." He glanced at the mansion, nodding his head reassuringly. "I suspect that little Richie must be an addict too, for the looks him." He let the name slide with a mocking timbre.

"He seems fun at times, if it weren't for his parents I wouldn't give it a second thought"

Harris narrowed his eyes after hearing her words and smirked under the mask, "Maybe you should give it more care, the boy is a vulture whose brains couldn't fill a teacup."

"To you, like any other." Harris saw her eyes roll up before she begun to climb the fence. "Hey, she deserves the best." He kept on whispering as she jumped down and crouched at his side, "Maybe if he shared the intellect of his father but not his profession..." He dragged the last syllables, yielding at her eyes. "Your excellence lifts me, dear, but I thought you were worried about making the wrong story on the news. The price is waiting." He nodded, in a silent sigh submerging the thought of Susan's angelical face and replacing it with the image of the Vermeer, the master's work imprisoned in the mansion before them. "Yes, let's go." The two shadowy figures ran left along the edge of the fence, in the space between it and the spare rows of old cypresses that meekly adorned the lawn, opposite to the route of the patrolling guard. Without having to turn, they reached a wing of the mansion reserved for servants and the less lustrous domestic tasks, contrived to a single floor and low ceilings. Near the entrance to its interior, by a stone well, an oak sprang its thick branches over the porch and roof of the modest construction. Harris looked back at the corner of the mansion that hid the guard's location, quickly calculating their window of action. He could see the segment of the fence where they broke-in and also hear loud barks piercing the night. An urge to spring up suddenly took his stomach. "Let's get on top at once." He could feel the heat of her breath on his ear, "You first. You'll need someone pushing your rear up." Harris made way up the oak, its heavy leaves barely rustling, and crawled onto the roof, behind a metal chimney. He looked down at Emily's form, blended against the well, and lifted his arm pointing upwards. She rushed to the imposing tree. Harris watched her briefly until she disappeared under the edge of the roof. A shiver down his spine snapped his head back in the direction of the yard before them. Nearing the corner of the mansion next to their wing, a good fifty yards in between, a stiff figure walked under the lamp light, zig-zagging by the pull of a leashed dog. "Still, the guard!"

Harris bit his lower lip and pressed his fingers against the cold edge of the chimney, not a breath. Silence cried out. His heart was as frozen as the profile of the can, both suddenly held rigid, for a moment, until the animal lashed out bellowing towards them like a devil from the nine hells. The man fell flat on his face, by instinct holding firm to the leather until the massive dog, dragging him over the grass, broke his grip on the leash and darted against the oak. Emily was at roof level when it reached the base of the tree, growling and barking in blind fury. Harris threw a hand to her forearm as she mantled over the edge and pulled her towards him, behind the chimney. The man in the yard barely had time to get up before the tree was still again. They could see him through the foliage, padding his clothes while walking towards the animal, who still howled frantically. Harris peered over the roof's edge at the couple, now the man almost as belligerent as the dog, cussing at it while trying to get a hold of the leash. "Rocco! Quiet!, Shut up I say, damned dog! You will wake up the whole house!." Harris got a good view of them. The enormous rottweiler drooled in anger, trying to hop up the tree. Growling at the man, it jumped to bite his hand when he tried to reach for the leash. He looked at Emily's inquisitive eyes, "It's a bloody monster."

The oil lamp on the table lit the room's high ceilings with voluptuous shadows. Police Chief Charles Hampton could figure naked women in their contours, luring him into a dance at an exotic beach and sipping cocktails under the torrid sun. Three or four of them should do, girls that is, well, both. His fat, lower lip widened in a wishful grin, drooping at the bottom. He took a mouthful of gin. The imaginary world gave him intense relief, anywhere better than here, with Vivian in the middle of an argument about Richard's teenage fads and that bloody demented cousin of hers, Thomas, who about four hours ago decided that it would be a good

idea to urinate inside Charles' shoe drawer. He suspected that Thomas was not an isolated case in his wife's genealogy, and secretly feared to have contracted matrimony with a latent schizophrenic. He looked at her, sitting in the sofa in front of him with a bourbon in hand. She was a fair and languid woman of carefully arranged appearance, her skin untouched by the vicissitudes of manual labor. So soft a complexion that her armpit hair was virtually non-existent, Charles was not sure anymore about the state of her remaining hairy spots, and he shook the thought away with a shiver. Despite her calm pose she hid an irritable temper that at times turned her pale form into a crimson harpy. Something in her was eerie, and this unnatural character had been growing through the years, maybe that's why he could not shake away the thought of females of flesh and bone, who would sweat and smell and yell out their lungs. Perhaps marrying in the upper brackets had not been such a good idea as he thought twenty years ago, although then he would not be Police Chief Charles Hampton but merely Charles Ruffus, son of Jack the clockmaker. Nothing very appealing there. Vivian is rich and a Police Chief is nothing if not an accomplished, daring and sagacious mind. Maybe a little eroded after the years, he admitted to himself. His dark thick hair turning ash gray, getting a little wide on the low chest perhaps, ever since he stopped walking the streets and got a desk job. He wasn't as handsome now, sure, but he liked to think that years had favored him, like an aged wine, in the subtleties of human condition enough to impress any woman. Charles smiled to himself, his eyes crystallized by his fantasies and the running alcohol.

"Why are you smiling?, Richard's future is at stake and you seem to not care. Moreover, you are not listening to me. What did I say?"

"Darling, I hear you perfectly fine, you said that he was out with some girl called Susan."

"I think the name is Susan, I do not know with certainty, Charles."

"Whatever, so the boy is having a good time and I smiled about it, nothing strange there."

"He is eighteen, Charles. He barely got his driving permit and already is coming home several hours into the night. With all the perversity that plagues the town at night, you should be worrying more than anyone else about where your son spends his leisure time." She gulped the remaining bourbon, stood up and went over to the golden bar tray. Charles watched her pour another glass as she turned to him. "And do not even think about assuring me that the streets are safe, filthy with indigents and prostitutes as they are." He nodded at her words. He could have boasted of his aggressiveness against criminal activity but he had a soft spot for the girls and no desire to steer the conversation anywhere but down the drain.

"Listen, Darling, Vivian. I will talk to him, together if you want, in the morning. It has been a tense day and I need sleep."

"Oh yes, the same way that you choose to deal with all problems, to sleep through them. It is me who will have to wake him up while you are having fun with your buddies, always without time except for that which you call work." Charles gazed at her in silence, offended at the way she said *buddies*, as if framing the meaning of his existence around a dependency on their support and approval. He had quite an affection to the boys, but he was not one to be dependent. He was Police Chief Charles Hampton, and he was a self-sufficient man.

"Bloody hell Vivian! Don't bring my work into this, it is enough to deal with this madhouse! I will drag him out of bed and change damned Thomas' diapers as well if you want but bloody let my work out of the picture." He emptied his glass, slammed it against the wooden arm of his chair and started to utter a word when an incessant barking interrupted it between his heavy lips. Vivian stared at him with hands in her chest and mouth, covering her

startled expression. "I can't believe you said that about Thomas." He got up and peered down the window, turning away from the still eyes fixated on his bent figure. He opened it with a heaving push. "Robert! Why is the dog howling like a demon?!" He could barely see the chamberlain's frame, circling around the rottweiler until he heard the shout through the windows, straightened up and replied to him. Vivian had not blinked yet. Thomas embodied the quintessential element of innocence and honesty that she always strove to maintain in her family. He was not a mentally handicapped man, not even a simple one, but merely fragile in psychic constitution against the cruelty of existence, open to the forces of nature like an unmanned sail to the winds of the sea. By God, he was a real Hampton, despite hardships carrying the torch of enlightened principles over a world of barbarism.

"He says that the dog is barking at the oak but that he cannot see anything." Charles closed the window with a strong push and turned slowly to Vivian, looking at the wooden floor. "Robert is getting old. If that guard does not improve soon then Rocco is going to eat him one of these nights. It has been three days since he has not come and Robert cannot cover that service in his condition." He stared at the ornate walls behind her and felt to be addressing the morning meeting with the officers on duty. "I can't believe you said that about Thomas." She repeated her last sentence as if no time had transversed between them. Charles looked at her wondering, for a moment, how to mend his words. He knew very well how much Vivian considered her demented cousin to be a grown, sensitive and adorable man. He served himself a gin and looked at the ceiling--naked women running wildly amongst a pack of dogs.

"Fine, do not apologize for insulting a member of my family, being unappreciative towards Thomas is perfectly acceptable for a worm, we do not need excuses." She pierced him with her clear eyes, swallowed her bourbon and poured a new glass. Charles, hunching his shoulders, followed Vivian's movements with his eyes narrowed to slits. He took his hands to his head, trying to appease the continuous barks resonating in his skull. "Well, he could have bloody appreciated me before going to the toilet over my rows of mocassines! Or before coming naked to our bed at five in the morning spitting on my chest! Christ! The man has the social skills of a cockroach and I am the one that is supposed to learn how to behave?!" He forced the window behind him open. "Robert! Robert! Silence that blasted dog already before I shoot its bloody hide!" He closed the window in a loud thud and again turned to Vivian. Closing his eyes tightly, he rubbed his temples. "You vicious bastard!" Charles looked just on time to lean his mass away from the incoming bourbon shot glass, aimed with desperate force straight to the middle of the Police Chief's brow. The projectile found target in the window behind him, crashing through over the yard. Rocco stopped barking at Robert and the oak, dully turning its drooling jaws toward the broken window.

Seizing the moment, Robert took a deep breath and threw his squalid hand to the leash of the startled dog. He smiled to himself when his fingers clasped the strap. In the thirty five years of service to the Hamptons he had never seen such an untamed beast. Images of the past drifted by his nebulous pupils. If times were as they used to be then he would be here with a heavy cane instead of a bloody rope and then good ol Rocco would learn to respect its elders. A vibration in the back of his neck warned him that perhaps it would be better to not think about sticks around this dog but the temptation to scold the animal had grown measurably after hearing Mr. Hampton threats. He knew that the Police Chief did not say things lightly and he was not about to displease the lord of the house, no sir, specially now that blood ran hot. Despite the long procession of seasons, he was still an able man who could be entrusted with keeping tight control over a damned dog. He nodded, reassured, and the thought of the bright orange cane returned to his mind.

"Enough nonsense, Rocco. You are going straight to the pen." It still gazed at the broken glass trying to make sense out of the sudden change of circumstances. Rocco's world was unidirectional. It could hold one purpose at a time, preferably one that involved cracking something between its jaws. The oak fixation was shattered along the mansion's window, leaving only one object of interest for its heated desires. Robert stiffed his back and started to walk away holding the leash, until it tightened. He heard a low growl behind. "We are going now." He yanked the leash trying to force the dog to follow, who slid an inch before growling louder. Robert turned slowly. His mind resorted to images of potentially more effective and dramatic tools for the task. Rocco tilted its head to the side and looked at Robert's face. He could see the glimmer of its eyes shielded in the dark, a solid wooden cane filtering through his vision, spiraling into the grotesque shadowed form before him. His mouth opened, following suit to the mind; he could have sworn that the beast swallowed his thoughts. Rocco snarled, barely showing its shining fangs. Robert, as if shaken from a dream, suddenly noticed the backdrop of the lawn, black shadow under the oak near shards of glass, Rocco and the closed door to the servant's quarters. Before he could pad his left pocket for the keys, a menacing whisper froze his motion. He lowered his gaze to meet the rottweiler's lips, baring rows of sharp teeth.

"Rocco!,,, Rocco! Sit!" The chamberlain started to walk backwards awakened by an impulse from his gut. He pointed at the animal with a finger, holding it firm like a shield between their eyes. Rocco's grin widened as Robert made distance between them. One paw advanced and the dog's eyes gleamed, seeing him doubt.

"Roocoooo..." He was already running before he could finish the command. His wiry frame seemed to disjoint in its unbridled run through the yard, the flurry of limbs sharing only one common motion, that opposite to Rocco. The rottweiler stood rigid watching the prey make distance, licking its snout in anticipation of the chase. It growled and bolted like an arrow towards the chamberlain. Robert's world reduced to two ends, Rocco's jaws and the tall chicken wire of its pen, everything else faded into the black of the night. The headlights of the car entering the driveway twinkled like distant stars.

Richard was not very surprised to see lights in his parent's bar room, he had been arriving late recently, ever since he met Susan. Mother was probably howling, making a big scene, convinced that doom was certain for her child--as if he could not make his own destiny; like father, always leeching her contacts and wealth. He would sit through the bellowing and then, oh then, she would be waiting in his room, finally, after following her lead night after night through a newly discovered underworld of teeming corruption and sweet pleasure. Getting Susan up to the second floor wouldn't be a problem: she said she remembered the layout of the house after attending a party with the Dexters three weeks ago, mother's latest social charade. Everyone but Robert would be sleep soon and he cannot see two inches in front of his nose. He smiled at Susan, who sprawled her legs and arms over the wide seat of the convertible golf. Never had he seen a grace like hers. The slender form moved with the deliberation of felines; her eyes wide ovals of green sea, crowned with a fiery mane. He felt that he had missed during his whole life a side of human nature worth pursuing, no more norms, customs and masks of society, no more deception in a wasted existence dedicated to pleasing the neighbor and mutilating one's passion. He turned the car into the driveway, facing the complex, after opening the gate with a remote control.

"You. You are a goddess." Susan laughed and took a mouthful of dark beer.

"You better believe that, and you're all mine." She fluttered her eyelashes and suddenly, looking towards the facade of the mansion, opened them widely. "Someone's

running. Over there." Susan pointed ahead and Richard leaned through the open window. The beams of the car illuminated the front doorsteps and, in the blink of an eye, Robert, who ran with a vigor that he had not thought possible in the old man. As abruptly as he crossed the lights he left them in direction to the parking lot and the pen. Richard's surprised stare followed him until he heard a growl that made him jump on his seat. He turned to the sound, barely catching sight of what looked like a hundred and fifty pound baboon in hot pursuit. "Holy." He turned to Susan, eyebrows wrinkling his forehead and his mouth still open from the exclamation. "Damn Rick, that's one mean puppy, need a hand?" Richard shook his head. "No, no, everyone's awake. This looks messed up already."

Susan noticed him glancing at the windows before the car, then at the front door and the corner to the right, where the runners disappeared. Rick was a beautiful diamond in rough but he was still insecure and in need of self-confidence, even more so when confronted with his family. Nothing that can't be polished--particularly by example. "How about I sneak into your place and you go help that man, uh?"

"Are you sure that you'll be fine? My parents are up a floor above it, do you remember where the stairw..." The word whistled around Susan's index when she placed it against his lips. She brought it back pointing to her head. "It is all in here. Park over, sugga."

Richard stopped by the front porch and looked at Susan as she rounded the car towards his side. She opened her palm and grinned. He gave her a key ring, "That one." He smiled at her, "Good luck."

"I don't need any" She winked an eye and hopped up the steps without making a sound.

Emily almost laughed when the rottweiler rushed after the thin man, she expressed her satisfaction by squeezing Harris' forearm, who turned to her with a wrinkled brow. "This is a mess, that beast has probably alarmed the whole place, and it looks like it will last."

"The better for us. Fatty will be busy with it while we sneak in and Vivian must be reaching for her valiums by now." She turned towards the broken window two levels above them, "Who would've imagined that the woman had some nerve."

"I don't like it." Harris squinted at the wall of the mansion, looking over the balcony straight above to the windows in the third floor. "Maybe we should wait a little."

"For sunrise? at this pace they'll be up until the maids get to work. Besides, since when do you turn down a party?" Emily winked at him. "Let's get to that guest room first instead, I'll go up after that while you check the stairs to the first floor." Harris thought of the Vermeer hanging on the wall of the bar room, gentle and weightless before his eyes during Vivian's party, a veritable pearl thrown to swines, and nodded. "I won't pass, but we are here for the painting. Let's keep a cool head."

"You first."

Harris and Emily Dexter were a high class couple, they didn't enjoy the material wealth of a family like Vivian's but they did not lack commodities and security for the future. Their nocturnal occupation was not a means of subsistence, Harris' inheritance took all the responsibilities instead, but was a craft that they both had developed in their youth, when their future looked gray and hostile. They both started picking pockets in the streets very early--Harris out of a turn of fate that left him an orphan; Emily out of necessity to feed herself and her poor family. Everything changed for Harris when his paternal uncle included him in his will, taking pity after the denial that the proud family imposed on the child, born of one of them and a pauper, a prostitute for all they cared. He strove to become a reputable, educated citizen, seeking to honor his mother and his birthright, but he was never able to forsake the world of the night and the intense pleasure of the theft. Emily shared his passion with even

more zeal. Despite the years of comfort away from hunger, regardless of the maternal consciousness she discovered with the birth of Susan, she craved the danger of sneaking through the shadows, against all suspicion breaking the rules of society, the monotonous and predatory monster that lurked in every inch of grime that surrounded her childhood. They were both passionate and cunning, both alert and full of sensations of life. Both missed the car driving into the yard during their decision to carry on.

The heavy leaf of the front door turned slowly without a sound, barely bothered by the interruption of its slumber. Susan covered with a quick look the dim reception hall, the doors to the piano room, the dining room, two bathrooms, halls to the kitchen--by the servant's quarters--and another door, which she suspected led to the basement. Directly in front, flanked by them, the stairway worked a semi-circle into the ceiling, leading to a platform at the second floor. Windows at the two last levels faced the shaft opened by the stairs. Everything was as Susan remembered. She squinted at the second floor window and focused her hearing. Muffled voices in the third floor, loud enough to make it all the way down, the Hamptons in a probable argument, and she imagined them gulping liquor while reprimanding Rick. Rick. Damned be curiosity. She never had imagined that someone could have enough pull to pry her away from breathing the danger and mystery that she learned to love so deeply. In other circumstances the house's crevices would be hers to exploit but somehow that was the last thought in her mind. His innocence brought a surprising relief to life, and as much worry to dad. The boy was so scared before him that he barely could speak. Yet, that smile, the laughs together, the warmth in the breast. Damned be the shadows, tonight they hide only him. Susan ran in light strides over the hardwood floors and climbed the stairs without grabbing the rail, barely touching the carpeted band before reaching the next step. When she landed in the second floor platform, the sound of a door slamming open boomed above her, as if blasted by the shrieks that followed immediately. "Go have fun with Robert and Rocco! And I hope that you develop emphysema during your sleep tonight, dear, in the bloody cellar!" Susan heard loud stomps through the ceiling, Rick's father was about to make his way down the stairs. She looked across the hallway, towards his room, no time to make it there. The door to the right! It was open but a second, Susan ran across the dark room to the wall closet, its segmented wooden panel filtering inside the light coming through the window. She opened it and slid behind it as fast as she maneuvered the first door. Nothing. The hammering steps faded in the distance. Susan took a deep breath and, suddenly, she stopped. Her eyes turned slowly to the left, across the wide closet space, and her pupils shrank when they met the hunched, naked figure staring back. Thomas couldn't believe his eyes either.

Police Chief Charles Hampton couldn't recall a more irritating night: his person assaulted, his ancestry scorned, his work debased and his dedication unnoticed, urine over his mocassines and an assassin rottweiler running amok on his yard. The only fantasies that could now console his palpitating state were all too horrible to entertain. Bloody Vivian and her presumptuous moral superiority. He stormed through the house and out of the front door, turning left towards the parking lot, towards the barking, without hesitation. He discerned the situation only after nearing close to the pen's perimeter; the alcohol and bobbing of his strides blurred the vision before him. Never mind, he had now an objective in mind and only needed to know where it was. "Richard, open the gate." The young man had closed the dog inside the pen, who now jumped against its back wall trying to snap Robert's shaky legs. He was barely supporting his frame on the chicken wire, trying to climb away from the open jaws below him. Richard opened the gate without a word and his head followed the great incoming

mass of his father inside the pen, who took impulse as he went in. Rocco squatted before making an attempt at the chin, unaware of the peril and Charles found what he was looking for. He used all his momentum to power a kick aimed right between its legs. A sharp thud cut the air. The dog flew against a corner of the pen and lowered his head, yelling, incapable of anything but trying to lick the fire inside its testicles. The Police Chief didn't give it a second look, lifted the chamberlain from the fence and helped him walk out of the pen. "Richard, close the gate."

"Good heavens, father."

"Rocco will be fine. Why in the devil are you coming at this time of the night? Can't have fun with that Sarah girl at more decent hours or what, boy?"

"Susan, her name's Susan. And I apologize for being late, again. Time just flew by, sorry. I'll be up early I promise"

"Don't give me the speech, save that for your mother. At least one of us had some display of feminine affection. Between Rocco and Vivian, here Robert and I have had an unforgettable night to say the least."

"Thank you for your help Mr Hampton, your son and I were about to fool that bloody animal, yet your performance was most welcome, and satisfactory, if I may say so."

"Good."

"Is mother sleep?"

"Talk to her in the morning. Looks like I am sleeping in the remaining guest room. I hope Thomas remembers which is his."

"Damn."

"What?"

"No nothing, just sorry about that, father."

"I'll live. My kingdom for a warm bed and some hours of quiet sleep."

"I would agree whole heartedly, sir. If you do not require my services I would be enchanted to retire for the evening."

"Sure, Robert. Hell of a night."

The trio begun walking back to the entrance of the house, each submerged in their own thoughts and speaking no word. The only perceptible sound came from the pen, Rocco licking its groin between drowned yaps.

Harris and Emily hopped into the wide balcony of the second floor, directly above the roof of the servant's quarters. One of the sliding doors of the room was wide open, nothing appearing behind the wavy curtain. A moment ago they had heard Vivian howling and heavy steps flying downstairs, Charles was going to deal with the dog. It was the perfect time. They sneaked inside the room in complete silence, their figures as Chinese shadows on a wall. Emily barely opened the door to the hallway and glanced back at Harris. He nodded, staring at her. She vanished into the hall like a cloud of smoke. Harris peeked out and saw her tip toeing up the stairs, then she was gone. Damn. Risky. The painting had not been rigged with security as far as they could tell, but the house was a hive of activity, and Harris did not like to leave things to chance. He focused his hearing as finely as he could--nothing stirred its clear membrane. C'mon Emily, just cut that baby out of its prison, roll it up and hop out of the third floor in a heartbeat.

Thomas did not know this girl, of that he was fairly certain. She stroke him as really beautiful, her wide eyes and round lips lighting her face in the dark of the closet. Maybe she would want to play with him, he would like her to play, not in a while had he had so much happening around him and that was worth sharing. The dog barking, chasing the thin man,

broken windows, Vivi upset with fat man and an angel in the closet, all very exciting. As exciting as when he made the ugly shoes shiny, new again. He could not understand why fat man was upset, but he learned not to do that again, so he came instead to the contiguous guest room closet when the urge pressed him. He was crossing his legs with effort, hands pressed against his groin, not out of decorum but need to evacuate. Susan could hardly understand the circumstances, and thought that she had just interrupted a relative of Rick with a suspicious fetish for masturbating in closets. The idea didn't help to alleviate her tension. For the looks of his eyes, he must have been near completion and surely her presence came very inconveniently, or conveniently. That idea helped even less. She kept the stare locked on his eyes, preparing to leave the closet as quiet and fast as she entered it. Thomas felt very impolite, he remembered what to do when meeting new friends. He took a hand out of his crotch and extended it towards Susan.

"Keep away from me you bloody pervert!" She pushed the closet doors open and bursted out waving her clenched fists in the air.

"Su... Susan?"

She turned around and jumped back, taking her hands to her mouth at the sight of the tall, black figure standing by the door to the hall.

"Dad?"

"What the devil are you doing here?" Harris looked away from her when he noticed Thomas deep inside the closet, covering his genitals and staring blankly at them. Harris jumped over the bed between them, grabbed Thomas by the neck and dragged him out with a quick pull.

"And you. What are you doing to my daughter! Who is this man, Susan?"

"I've no idea. I came with Rick. He was in the closet when I got here trying to sneak in"

"That is hard to believe, Susan. And you, who are you? speak before I crack your neck, pal."

Thomas' brain didn't make sense out of what was happening. He stared terrified to the black figure born from the shadow that pierced him with flaming eyes. Words usually came to him with difficulty, now he could only spit in confusion.

"Stop drooling on me, stupid. Are you mentally crippled or what? Susan, I hope this is not the type of man that you see with frequency."

"Dad! And what are you doing here, uh?"

"Not a word, lady, I'm doing the questions now." Harris peered deep into Thomas' eyes, taking a second of silence to scan them. He recognized that the man's intentions were frozen, blank of any thought but Harris' penetrating eyes, the suspicion that he was a clinical idiot took further ground in his mind. The sound of footsteps became palpable in the short silence and he knew that he could not warn Emily, there was time enough to get out through the balcony and think of how to get the girls out of the damned place as soon as possible.

"Listen up you idiot." Harris pulled Thomas face against his own, masked by the black cloth that revealed only his eyes, like embers fixated on the shaking man. "We are leaving now, but I will be listening, and if you say a word about her or me then I'll rip your breast apart and eat your innards, understood?!" Thomas didn't have time to reflect on the words, he started to wail and sob almost immediately, genuinely scared out of his flesh by the menacing voice threatening to hurt him. Harris turned to face Susan, confused at Thomas' reaction. He released his neck from the ferrous grasp and took Susan into the balcony with him, helping her step on the trim surrounding the outer walls of the mansion. Thomas had never been so daunted in his life--the image of the fiery eyes still burned in his imagination. He felt an overwhelming terror take possession of every fiber of his being. Out of control, he begun crying at the top of his lungs, rolling over the bed with a pillow over his face, trying to hide

away from the man who hurt him so. His agitated state yielded to the pressure and his bladder finally started to empty.

Charles Hampton and son sped up the stairs as soon as they heard the cries from the unoccupied guest room. The Police Chief opened the door of the room and threw the switch; his skin reddened like a cherry when the lights bathed the dantesque scene.

"Oh my God. Oooh my bloody damned God!" Charles held his dropped jaw between his trembling hands. "Thomas! Stop! Stop you retarded lunatic!"

Thomas rolled frantically over the bed, screaming like a sacrificed pig--urine splashed over furniture, carpet, bed and the Hamptons, who in vain tried to restrain his convulsions. "To bloody hell with my bed! Jesus Christ Thomas! You want to throw me out of my house, eh, don't you! Richard! Hold legs, he's slippery son of a bitch."

"Leave him alone. Brutes!" Vivian interrupted the struggle and rushed to Thomas. She held his torso on her arms while he quietly cried over her neck, his whole body trembling like an autumn leaf. "You are only scaring poor Thomas. Get out of my sight, you pair of good for nothing stumps." Vivian didn't wait for them to move--she helped her cousin out of the bed and slowly walked him upstairs, gently patting his back. Thomas followed like a lost dog. In the room, Charles and Richard stared at each other, their clothes spotted by dark splashes. "I am not sleeping in the cellar tonight son, nor anywhere in this damned house, I'd probably get defecated on my chest, or worse. I am going to a bloody motel. What are you going to do?"

"I should hurry to my room and change. This is very embarrassing" The Police Chief waved his hand, walking hunched towards the hallway.

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow." He slowly went down the steps, the world heavy over his shoulders. Richard looked at him as he walked downstairs, a hand wiping his tired eyes. It was the first time that he felt distinctively the uncanny power of familiar bonds, over all material possession, over all grief. He thought of Susan, quickly replacing the previous revelation, and rushed down the hall towards his room.

Harris and Susan stood against the wall over the stone trim, flanking the balcony of the ravaged guest room. She had not blinked away from her father, unwilling to discard the questions that boiled in her head. They whispered along the light breeze of the night.

"Pretty scene, dad."

"Hey, how was I supposed to know? And the picture of you two inside the closet is not pretty either.

"I did come with Rick."

"Not that much better."

"Dad! So you were not following me. Then you were stealing, dad! You promised me that you wouldn't steal from my friends, how can you do this? Is mom here with you?"

Harris looked away from her eyes, gazing at the open before them.

"Look, we have to get us all out of here and then we can discuss morality."

"So she is here, uh? What are you after?"

He again turned away from her, not bearing to tell her straight in the face.

"A Vermeer."

"Grand, dad. Positively wicked. You are risking mom and me and you for a bloody painting."

"Hey, she wants that thing even more than I do. In either case, things would not have gone sour if you had been sleeping at home like you were supposed to be."

A gentle whistle turned their heads upwards. By the slanted ceiling trim of the third floor, Emily waved a long, rolled canvas in her hand. She suddenly stopped and stared at her

daughter.

"Susan?"

"Hi mom."

"What?..." Emily looked at Harris in amazement. He smiled behind the mask, seeing clearly Emily's prize, but then he limited to shake his shoulders and make her a signal to step down. "The balcony is clear." She let her thin body land on the rail guard and slid down against the wall, by their side.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came with Rick."

"Oh fun, did you have a good time?"

"Mom, I would be if you two weren't stealing from him."

"Sussie, my darling, you do not fall short of our deeds. Need I remind you that you occupy your time stealing magnificent jewelry when you are not doing the same to young men's hearts?"

"But I really like him, mom. How am I going to look at him straight in the face knowing that we stole from his family."

"Ask him if he wants a cut. If your feelings are strong enough to grow love then you must be willing to go all the way. The past cannot ever be erased."

"You are bloody crazy, Emily."

"I am serious. When the time to voice your deepest concerns arrives, if he is one of your kind then the words will flow like water; if he is not then you won't be able to utter a sound." She waved her hand like a bird fading into the winds, turned to her daughter and a smile shone through the glimmer of her eyes.

"Damn. You always make things sound so easy."

"But they are, darling."

"Let's jet, ladies, we can discuss this on a more comfortable setting."

"Wait. Rick was expecting me. Should I leave then..."

"Whatever, you want to finish what you started tonight, young lady--no shame in that."

"Mom!"

"Are you going to encourage her to go to that vulture's nest? No way, she is coming with us."

"Don't make a fool of yourself now, sweetie, you were so perfectly adorable just nodding. Susan is right, and it is her time now. We are shadows into the night." Emily jumped down to the servants quarters' roof and waved the canvas towards them. Harris, looking at Susan in silence, took a deep breath.

"Bah, get going. Pirate!"

She smiled, knowing already what she would say to him. With a feline hop she crept into the balcony and crawled inside the fateful guest room, disappearing completely from Harris' view. His angel had grown wings. He jumped down by Emily and gave a last glance to the open window.

"She'll be fine, silly. I think you have forgotten how it was when I courted you."

"What do you mean? I courted you."

"Sure." Emily made a gesture pointing at the oak before them. "You first."

After the car roared its way in the direction of the closest motel, the lights of the house died one after another, its inhabitants falling into the blurry dreamworld of shadows, monsters and feats, unaware of the full extent of activity in the Hampton's residence. All except one. Rocco sat over his water container, staring complacent to the yard before him, despite the pain and the two shadows that crept over the fence into the dead of night.