

The Haunting of Rocco Harper

A Shadowmoon Story

by Matt Barninger

Rocco Harper, the crown prince of Muscovany peered through the branches of the tree. A lone deer was close, grazing, and oblivious to his presence. Turning away he let the branch slide quietly back. He rubbed his temple. Anytime he thought of the girl, bam a migraine. This one had been nagging him for a few hours. His reddish hair glistened in the morning light. He hesitated. If he didn't leave now the reporters would leave and make up a story. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad. At least the truth would be out. Besides, how was he supposed to know the American tourist was only fifteen? It's not like he asked for her identification at the hotel. How did they even find the body?

The deer shook and rattled a bush by ripping leaves off its branches. Rocco looked at the deer and back towards the trail and ridge line. He had taken his rifle and told his family he was going hunting. He said he'd be back by noon to meet the reporters. He lied. He had no intention of turning himself in or of hunting.

He had left at dawn. By mid-morning, he'd reached the south side of the mountain. He had crossed rocky crevices, through a green valley, up a chasm, and through a stream. He popped his head up. A roaring waterfall echoed in the distance. He knew where he was, just a few miles up the ravine from where he killed his first deer. What a fickle thing memories are. Randomly taking me back to a seemingly unrelated event. He grinned. That seemed like another life now. What had it been? Twenty years. He had been twelve the winter he shot the deer in the chest from 75 yards. His grandfather, the king, at the time, had bragged for weeks.

“The Prince is the best shot in the kingdom,” echoed his grandfather.

He sure wouldn’t have cheated on his wife with a fifteen-year-old tourist and then drowned her.

Rocco rubbed his temple again. The mere thought of the girl induced headaches. The anxiety of running from his thoughts was unbearable. Richard leaned the rifle on the nearest tree and headed away from his family and former life.

A week ago he had quietly chartered a helicopter and pilot to meet him at Crowley's Ridge at noon today. It was about a six-mile walk from his estate. The pilot had come highly recommended by a retired French special forces operator. The operator had previously worked security for the royal family.

A soul-splitting crack blasted like a tornado siren. Scared, he jumped. Far behind him, he heard trees rocking back and forth. He jumped over a dead tree landing on a run. Something knocked him forward slamming him to the ground. All he saw were uprooted trees scattered across the forest. Squinting his eyes, he looked around expecting an attacker. He opened his eyes but the forest was normal again. He squinted his eyes again and rubbed his temple furiously.

The buck still eating slowly lifted its head in his direction. Momentarily, the deer locked eyes with his, as if to say hey what’s wrong with you man, and then quickly disappeared into the thick undergrowth. He was baffled. He looked up. The sky was blue as the morning reflection on Lake Moonsea on a calm morning.

“Hello,” he screamed, his voice echoing through the forest. Standing up he brushed his pants off continuing up the trail. He wobbled as the pain from his temple became momentarily debilitating.

He slowly opened his eyes. Hell had returned. It began to pitch and roll violently. Lightning cracked and the winds violently rustled the trees. The wind whistled as it ran across the treetops.

“Murderer,” it whispered. Then again, a whistle from behind. “Rocco, we know. We know and the crown can’t run.” The lightning menaced another crack.

“The crown can’t run,” the whistle echoed from behind.

He snapped around to confront the voice only to witness debris plummeting down the side of the mountain in a deafening rumble right at him. He screamed, raising his arm to block the avalanche of debris. Seconds went by and there was no crash. He opened his eyes. The sky was clear, again.

“Rocco, I told you I can’t swim,” whistled the trees.

Frantic and crazed, he sprinted up the trail, through briars and thickets. The branches slashed and cut his face and arms, but he was too panicked to realize. Blood poured out of a gash on his elbow.

“The Crown will not run,” screamed the voice of a woman. The thunder bellowed and the lightning cracked, illuminating the forest.

“No,” he screamed. “I didn’t know.”

“Liar,” whistled the forest.

Rapidly moving clouds blotted out the sun, raining mud, water, and ash. Rocco ran. The air stunk like a stale pond, where the water hadn’t moved in weeks. He kept running, past downed trees, over a creek, through a small clearing.

Twenty minutes later he burst through the smoke and fire on top of the ridge. Gasping for air he collapsed onto the semi-charred ground. He was burnt, hair singed completely off most of his body. His tattered clothes barely clung to his burned body. While sticking to the badly burned areas. His breathing was erratic and strained, his eyes fluttered uncontrollably. He could see a figure approaching. The figure was draped in light and the branches of the forest covered her.

“I told you I can’t breathe,” whispered the apparition of the murdered girl as it dissipated in the violent winds.

“No. Please, I’m sorry. Please,” he whimpered.

“Over here. I’ve found him,” hollered a young guard. He pointed to a pair of legs extending out of a thicket. One boot was missing with that foot having been exposed to frostbite. “Help me pull him out of this brush.”

A sandy-haired Commander sprinted over and the men tugged on the cold hard body. After a moment the body broke away from the frozen ground with a crackling wrench.

It was indeed the Crown Prince. His body was discovered six miles away in a thicket of dogwood trees. His clothes were dirty and his hair had turned white. He had died with his eyes open. They were completely blood red with no visible burns anywhere on his body.

The end