

Mind Games

a novel

Kimberly
Hughes Hanley

MIND GAMES

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by

KIMBERLY HUGHES HANLEY



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Mind Games

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MIND GAMES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| CHAPTER 1 — ON PINS AND NEEDLES..... | 10 |
| CHAPTER 2 — LAST TAKE OF THE DAY..... | 18 |
| CHAPTER 3 — DINNER SHENANIGANS..... | 23 |
| CHAPTER 4 — MEMORIES | 33 |
| CHAPTER 5 — STEALTH MISSION..... | 43 |
| CHAPTER 6 — SWEET DREAMS | 45 |
| CHAPTER 7 — CAT & MOUSE | 47 |
| CHAPTER 8 — THE BREWING STORM..... | 65 |
| CHAPTER 9 — UNAUTHORIZED CONDUCT..... | 68 |
| CHAPTER 10 — ANTICIPATION | 71 |
| CHAPTER 11 — SLEUTHHOUND IN THE HOUSE | 73 |
| CHAPTER 12 — THE KISS..... | 82 |
| CHAPTER 13 — THREE’S COMPANY..... | 90 |
| CHAPTER 14 — ALL IN A DAY’S WORK | 97 |
| CHAPTER 15 — JIGSAW..... | 101 |
| CHAPTER 16 — OLLIE OLLIE OXEN-FREE..... | 109 |
| CHAPTER 17 — TOO STRANGE FOR WORDS..... | 117 |
| CHAPTER 18 — DINNER FESTIVITIES | 121 |
| CHAPTER 19 — DANGEROUS CHILD’S PLAY..... | 130 |
| CHAPTER 20 — RHAPSODY OUT OF CONTROL..... | 134 |
| CHAPTER 21 — SHARED CONFUSION | 138 |
| CHAPTER 22 — THE HIDDEN DOOR | 141 |
| CHAPTER 23 — THE JOURNAL..... | 146 |
| CHAPTER 24 — NEARLY DISCOVERED | 148 |
| CHAPTER 25 — UNWELCOMED INVITE..... | 155 |
| CHAPTER 26 — BETRAYAL OR SUPPORT..... | 157 |
| CHAPTER 27 — SCHIZO OR IS SO..... | 172 |
| CHAPTER 28 — TREADING WATER..... | 177 |
| CHAPTER 29 — A FAVOR IN NEED..... | 183 |
| CHAPTER 30 — TRIP TO TOWN | 185 |
| CHAPTER 31 — KITCHEN ROMANCE..... | 198 |
| CHAPTER 32 — FUN ‘N’ GAMES | 207 |
| CHAPTER 33 — SUBCELLAR COLLOQUY | 209 |
| CHAPTER 34 — DEMONS IN THE CLOSET | 217 |
| CHAPTER 35 — CHECKMATE | 223 |
| CHAPTER 36 — TOO HOT TO HANDLE..... | 236 |
| CHAPTER 37 — AULD LANG SYNE | 238 |

MIND GAMES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| CHAPTER 38 — QUIET INTERLUDE | 246 |
| CHAPTER 39 — CLOSE ENCOUNTERS | 251 |
| CHAPTER 40 — SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET | 254 |
| CHAPTER 41 — THE FLOWER OF INNOCENCE..... | 269 |
| CHAPTER 42 — STATION ANTICS | 271 |
| CHAPTER 43 — THE CABIN..... | 282 |
| CHAPTER 44 — A TIME TO BADGER..... | 287 |
| CHAPTER 45 — THE GULF..... | 289 |
| CHAPTER 46 — THE ANSWER..... | 294 |
| CHAPTER 47 — CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE SPOOKED KIND | 296 |
| CHAPTER 48 — SOME THINGS BETTER LEFT UNSAID | 298 |
| CHAPTER 49 — WHAT NEXT?..... | 299 |
| CHAPTER 50 — COWBOYS AND INDIANS | 301 |
| CHAPTER 51 — BUSTIN' LOOSE..... | 303 |
| CHAPTER 52 — CRYPTOGRAM..... | 307 |
| CHAPTER 53 — THE FINAL TOLL..... | 316 |

MIND GAMES



CHAPTER ONE

On Pins And Needles

WEDNESDAY, 5:07 P.M.

Ooouwee! No. Stop it! That hurts. What are you doing? Ouch. Noooooo!" The voices in the back seat slowly melded into a daydream. "Where are you taking me! Where are the children? I want to know. Answer me. What have you done with . . . Ooouwee! That's mine! Jon! Help me! Please, no, stop it . . ." The woman swerved to avoid a head on collision with a squirrel. That same nightmare she had relived almost weekly since the day Jonathan Banister disappeared, but the commotion going on behind her successfully arrested the vision. For that she was grateful.

"No! stop it!"

"No. You stop it!"

"No! Stop, gimme. Oouwee, that hurts. Mommy, make him stop!" whined the girl in the back seat of the Cadillac, she tussling with her older brother for possession of a hand-held computer game.

"No, you both stop it. Now!" hollered the woman, as she maneuvered the brown tank along the winding road toward a pale yellow garage.

Across the paved road, nestled atop a gentle sloping hill, stood an elegant Tudor home, ivy creeping its mauve window trim like green icing and colorful rose bushes framing its corners; a dazzling sky bursting with shimmering hues of gold and purple pressed against its back. West of the home, the setting sun faded behind an ocean of green grass; soon orange and red streaks would play peek-a-boo as they danced across the grayish-blue heavens, glinting the hilltop's edge.

Glimpsing the ominous rain clouds that slowly gathered south of her home, the olive complexioned woman stepped from the driver's side of the car and whisked a few strands of hair from her gray eyes; those salient orbs rimmed by fertile coal were cool enough to melt a salacious man's heart, if she stared his way.

Pleasantly plump, the forty-year-old flaunted her curvaceous figure-eight beneath a white tailored skirt-suit, but sadness marred her comely visage. Idly, she stood watching her twelve-year-old chase his younger sister from the other side of the vehicle; his jet black curls and olive skin he inherited from his mother, but her strawberry blonde tresses concealed the evidence, and the silky ringlets that bounced atop her golden head made her dark coloring seem more a year-round tan than all-natural. The boy also had the woman's smoldering looks; his sable eyes, set deep in their sockets, could penetrate a censoring soul.

His eight-year-old sister, chiseled with delicate features and fairer skin than he, took after their father. Her long hair, teased into soft puffs, hung at the sides of her temples like the ears of a lop-eared rabbit; tied at each end were two matching bows to accent the red ribbon that weaved around the bottom edge of her lacy white dress. Several tendrils of natural blonde locks framed her creamy white skin and velvet blue eyes. Despite her brother's aggravating spoofs, which he so loved to inflict, the child's demeanor remained relatively unchanged, very ladylike for a child of her age.

The boy lashed hard at her hair, yelling "Giddy up, Donkey," as they emerged from the rear seat. Perturbed by her brother's continual pranks, she shook loose from his grip and circled front of the car, seeking refuge behind their mother. Mistakenly, she sneered and poked her tongue out. Tony naturally would not let this minor insurrection pass unnoticed, and he chased after her, unwittingly tugging at their mother's skirt to propel himself faster around; he latched on to her hair and bridle her under his command. The woman had just smoothed the crinkles from her skirt when they began encircling her, screaming and arguing at the tops of their lungs.

"Tony! Jennifer! Behave yourselves! Your father would not tolerate this behavior," Melissa Banister scolded.

Jennifer whined, "Daddy's not here anymore, so he doesn't really care anyway 'cause he's never coming back. . . . OOWWEE!" she screeched. Tony had locked his fingers around both ponytails.

"Shut up, you—you . . . DONKEY!" he shrieked uncontrollably, spittle flying from his mouth. "You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know anything!" Tears streamed down his face, fury hard in his eyes. He wrenched Jennifer's hair even tighter around his fists; she screeched louder with every grueling twist. "You take that back. Now! Dad is coming back. You just wait. . . ."



Cutting between the children to unleash the girl from her brother's unrelenting grip, Melissa Banister caressed their napes, reassuring them both with a warm smile.

"Calm down, Tony. Jennifer's as distraught over Dad's disappearance as we are; you know that, son. Now come on, you're the oldest and you have to start behaving like it. I know it's hard to do sometimes, but you know Dad wouldn't like you acting up this way, let alone against your little sister. Straighten up now and be the little tyke he would have you be," she diplomatically chastened the boy. "Come along." Tony stole an occasional glare her way, his droopy puppy-eyes aimed mostly toward the ground. "Carla's probably waiting for us," continued the woman, without giving notice to his shamefaced leers; she did not want the boy to feel any worse than he obviously now felt.

The children pouted as they trudged across the road, pretending to be indifferent to the whole matter, when in reality they were covertly trying to outpace each other.

Melissa Banister's cheeks had flushed red, not for struggling to restrain her son only, but also for worrying about her husband—not to mention the dwindling savings. The burdens of these past several months had finally begun to strain her malleable features, yet her efforts to bridle fear had remained gallant, she not wanting to imagine the worst to have befallen Jonathan Everet Banister. Her knees buckled as awful thoughts pried through the gates of her mind, flashing horrific scenes of unthinkable carnage.

"Oh Jon," she quietly sighed, "what a brilliant man he was— IS," quickly she recanted, mortified to have allowed the unthinkable to brush pass her lips; her posture stiffened. "Oh, Jon, where are you?"

For so many years Melissa had looked to him for support, and now he was gone. Sure they had had their share of problems. *Who hasn't?* she reasoned. Still, Jonathan was always the bulwark, strong and courageous. Melissa never realized how much she depended upon him and how little she knew of even daily household finances, and other matters, until now.

She held the doorknob, steadying herself to shunt those dreadful thoughts, but they would not shake loose: her only recourse for now, neatly tuck the images away until later, when she could thoroughly and in private surrender to her imagination and allow it to reign with the hideous conclusions that she desperately wanted to deny.

* * * * *

Carla White, the Banister cook of ten years, had been watching the family ever since they parked the car. From her employer's countenance, she correctly surmised what Melissa Banister had been thinking. Not only a trusted employee, Carla fancied herself a close friend, if not Melissa Banister's closest. Although that thought was not far from the truth, no matter how close the women, Carla knew that Melissa was too proud of a woman to reveal her deepest fears to anyone, even a trusted companion; she also knew that embarrassment would have overtaken Melissa Banister were she to discover someone witnessing her lapse in strength.

Before the front door opened, Carla rushed from the bay window in the dining room to the kitchen; when she heard keys jangling against the doorknob as it closed, she pondered, "Should I tell her now or later?"

When the family stepped into the foyer, a rush of warm, sweet air flooded their senses with mouth-watering cinnamon rolls, roast beef and pecan pie. At least for the moment anxiety had melted with the dusk of day. They were home now, and, *emm!* everything smelled so deliciously inviting. Their only concerns immediately were the growing belly pangs that seized their attention, reminding them that it was nearly time to eat.

Carla White bustled behind the door, grabbing dinnerware as she paced the kitchen floor; she could hardly contain the news. She felt as though it were burning at the core of her innards, and without thinking, she burst into the dining room and converged upon the startled family.

"Mrs. Banister! Mrs. Banister! Detective Johnson called an hour ago. He sounded pretty excited. He said he needed to speak to you. Urgently! And he was diligent about it, too. He'll be here 'bout six he said. He seemed really rushed. I don't know if that's good or bad, but he did say—"

"Carla!" Melissa's hissing tone and binding stare arrested the maid's hysteria before she further alarmed the Banister children. Melissa knew well enough that Carla White had a tendency to over-exaggerate nearly everything, yet dismantling images of what might have happened to Jonathan Banister were creeping in through the crevice of her mind. Carla White's uncontrolled gibberish had succeeded in rousing her stomach into a frenzied knot. Melissa expelled a long deliberate, silent sigh to calm herself, but once again her knees buckled under pressure. She tried concealing Carla's



infraction but fidgeted with her watch band the way she had often fidgeted with a piece of jewelry when she felt worried or confused.

Grasping desperately for some semblance of composure, before the children lost theirs again, Melissa inhaled longer, deeper breaths then, allowing her chest to collapse as far in as it would go, she quietly exhaled. After a moment of silence to collect her thoughts, she noticed that Tony and Jennifer's inquisitive little faces were studying her face, searching for a comforting answer. Instead of addressing their visible queries right then, she hastened them to ready for dinner.

"Hurry up, darlings," she mustered a cheerful tone while clapping her hands together. "Let's go get ready to eat now, and make sure you wash and change your clothes. We are apparently expecting a dinner guest this evening. Isn't that lovely?" She and Carla forced placid smiles.

While waiting for the children to vacate the foyer, their gaze drifted toward each other and their pasted smiles gradually diminished as each searched the other for a ray of hope. Neither could offer encouragement; instead, fear glinted across both their eyes.

Noticing the children still standing there watching them, Melissa Banister turned hastily, railing, "Well! What are you waiting for? Get up those stairs and go get ready. Now!" she squawked, and they dashed for the steps and disappear into their bedrooms. Instinctively, Melissa grabbed Carla White's arm and whisked her into the kitchen where she could safely, out of the children's earshot, finish her report.

"Detective Johnson has new information about Dr. Banister!" Carla White's eyes widened as if glimpsing a revelation.

Melissa firmly shook her arm. "What is it!" Hysteria shot through her body, creeping up the back of her throat. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to pry the information from her maid. "What else did he say?" The demand sounded more like a whimper.

"Oh, Mrs. Banister," Carla's voice croaked and quivered, "I—I'm so frightened. He sounded strange, but he wouldn't tell me anything. Not anything! He said he would only talk to you." An alarming thought again flagged Carla White's attention. "Oh—ooh! Mrs. Banister, what if—"

"Stop it, Carla! You just stop it right there! Don't even think that," trilled Melissa. She was thinking the same thing but wanted to shove it from her mind. An overwhelming shudder seized her tired body, and she felt so limp and cold; her fingers were numb. Her whole world was crumbling before her eyes, and she could not lift a finger to stop it. Melissa Banister stood rigid, her arms clasped tightly under her

breast; she rocked herself slowly back and forth, rubbing her limbs gently and tapping her fingertips against her shoulders in an attempt to console herself.

After pushing open the kitchen door, Melissa turned to her maid and dryly affirmed, "Don't worry, Carla. All is well and all will be well. Make sure you are on your best behavior while the detective is here. And be careful what you say around the children. You know it's been difficult enough mollifying their active imaginations without your imprudent input." Melissa Banister then withdrew herself from the kitchen before Carla could respond.

* * * * *

The children had run into their rooms and straightway opened the adjoining double doors through which Tony sauntered and flopped down next to Jennifer on her bed. He stared out one of the big picture windows that flanked the bed.

"Boy, Mama sure seems uptight today," he complained, as he batted a foot against the white lace border trimming the bottom edge of the pink canopy.

"Yeah, I know." Jennifer busily ran a finger along the white full-size spread, tracing tiny pink and blue and green teddy bears and the matching colored tulips that each bear held. "And we better be good tonight, Tony," she hesitantly added. "It's been real hard on Mommy since Daddy left us, you know."

"Tee—ha! Look who's talking!" he barked, and moved into the blonde high-back wicker chair beside Jennifer's night stand. While fiddling with the brass lamp, Tony remembered their earlier argument. "Dad will be back," he grimaced, as he flicked the pink shade up then shook a fist in her face. "The next time you say he won't I'll . . ."

Tears were welling up in Jennifer's eyes; she was trying to restrain the flow, but a few drops fell to her cheek. Tony hated seeing her cry. Sure, he liked harassing her, but not the tears—anything but the tears!

When Tony put an arm around her shoulder, tears gushed forth as if a dam had broken. "I'm sorry, Jen. I'm just being a butt, as usual," confessed Tony, while he awkwardly jiggled her shoulders, hoping to console her. "Come on now, Lil' Sis, don't cry. Please don't cry."

Burying her face in Tony's budding chest, Jennifer quietly sobbed, "I love Daddy too, you know. "Sometimes—," she gasped hard, trying to control her trembling words, "sometimes I think you think you're the only one who loves him." Her words were faintly heard, but the scold, effective.



“Shhhh.” Tony pressed her head against his small chest, holding her even tighter. “I said I was sorry.” His voice fluttered higher, breaking under the pressure of his sister’s verbal chastening. “I really am,” insisted Tony, and he caressed her hair. Jennifer felt his body quiver slightly as he begged her to stop crying.

Taking her frail chin into his bungling hands, he wiped the tears with his thumbs then pinched her nose and commanded that she wash her face and ready for dinner. Hoping to evoke a smile, Tony swaggered toward his room, looking more like a waddling penguin than the suave pre-pubescent he thought himself to depict. “You know how Mama is if we’re late,” he added at the door.

Forcing a smile, Jennifer shook her head in agreement and sniffled as she got up and went to her bathroom.

Tony retreated behind the double doors and sighed wearily. “Wheou,” he wiped a brow, “I didn’t mean to do that,” he confided to himself, then he plopped across the full-size black and red pinstriped spread and propped one of several pinstriped throw-pillows under his head. Looking around at the many posters plastered on his wall, he sized up an empty spot next to a vintage race car; there he tacked up the action hero poster that he purchased that day at the mall. It rounded out his collection of favorite sports figures, movie stars and race cars, all of which he had acquired with his allowance money.

As in Jennifer’s room, and every upstairs bedroom, large picture windows flanked Tony’s bed—but the two end bedrooms, Jennifer’s and her father’s, were the brightest since they both had an extra window recessing in an alcove. A big old oak, however, loomed just outside of Jennifer’s bay window and partially blocked the morning sun. Every upstairs bedroom also had plenty of closet space, and Melissa Banister made certain that the children had workstations at which to study.

Out of clean towels, Tony slipped through the double doors that led into his mother’s bedroom and borrowed a fresh set. Every upstairs room opened into the adjoining bedroom so that, conceivably, they all could become one large living quarters, which was the initial intent when Jonathan and Melissa Banister first purchased the house ten years ago. Now that the children were older the doors were closed for privacy sake.

Through her bathroom wall Jennifer could hear Tony singing silly commercial jingles and she giggled. Contemplating his recent kindness toward her when she was crying, she thought about how much she

truly loved and looked up to Tony, even though he rarely ever showed her any side other than the rough-and-tough big brother who usually picked on his little sister, calling her “Donkey,” side. She sighed at the little girl in the mirror, determining what she would do with her hair this evening.

“No, he’ll just yank on my ponytails again. I could—hmm . . .”

CHAPTER TWO

Last Take Of The Day

Lieutenant detective Stanley Johnson had been rushing around all day, chasing dead leads. Had he not stumbled across the mysterious letter found at the Banister cabin that file would have been shuffled through the system and eventually forgotten, and other cases with fresher leads would have taken its place as precedence. Nearly everyone who worked the case had already concluded that good old Doc Banister deserted his wife and kids for a younger prettier dame, but Stanley Johnson knew better. All along he suspected something strange had happened to the professor, maybe during a lab experiment or something. A man planning to leave his wife and children would not have left behind invaluable research material and custom-built machinery. The lieutenant detective pondered the plausibility of Jonathan Everet Banister becoming the unfortunate victim of some happenstance that he himself created.

Perhaps it was indeed foul play; some officers liked musing that theory. The woman did it, they would say. Still, not enough concrete evidence to indicate foul play of any sort, thought Stanley Johnson, only a missing body—the professor's.

No clue seemed insight, until now.

Mapping the course of his evening for after the interview, Johnson planned to settle down into his old Lazy Boy recliner, pop open a slushy cold bottle of beer and feast in front of the boob tube on a hot juicy, frozen microwaved steak dinner—but first this final stop. Hopefully it would shed light on that letter.

As he steered the private road leading to the Banister estate, he perused the grounds for anything out of the ordinary; gnarled live oak wreathing along each side of the windy road made a searchlight essential: So far only those familiar warning signs posted on both sides of the path advising trespassers to *GO BACK! UNINVITED! TURN AROUND!* Beyond the giant trees, the lieutenant detective spotted amidst other trees and brush a small, well-camouflaged shack east of the Banister home. Typically quite observant, Johnson thought it strange to have not noticed that tree house until now. He took mental

note of its location then parked his beat-up faded blue Malibu next to Melissa Banister's shiny brown Cadillac.

He sat a moment collecting his thoughts then dragged himself from the vehicle and glanced up the long flight of stone stairs. Sucking in a deep breath, he thought, *What a day this has been*, then slowly began the ascent.

The bell-harps chimed. Carla White straightened her dress then inspected the dinner table as she bustled toward the front door. The six-foot two-inch ivory buck slumped against a porch column, obviously tired; he usually finessed fatigue with more vibrance, but this particular day had taken its toll; already he put in seventeen futile hours around town hoping to drum up new leads. It wasn't over yet.

"Detective Johnson!" chirped Carla White, extending a hand to take his gray hat and matching overcoat. "Please come in. We were expecting you."

Her warm greeting made him feel immediately welcomed. As a second burst of energy invigorated his weary limbs, he stood erect and gaited inside, sporting a wide grin. His crystal blue eyes sparkled as he glimpsed the fire crackling in the study hearth and the candlelight waltzing atop the dining room table. Albeit, he had worked this case for several months now, but he had never seen the Banister home at night. It was warm and inviting, not ostentatious in the least, as it had appeared against the brusque backdrop of day.

Emm, he thought, inhaling the flavorful aromas wafting through the air; it had been some time since he enjoyed a home-cooked meal. It actually made him sick to think of the artificial colored, artificial flavored, artificial who-knows-what awaiting him at his three-room flat.

"I wasn't even thinkin' when I said I was comin' at six," he quickly explained in a thick Cajun tongue, when he considered the time he had chosen to interview Melissa Banister. "I am so sorry, Ms. Carla. I really didn't mean to disturb her at her dinner hour. Please give her my sincere apology. What I have really can hold tell mornin'. Tell her I'll return then," he said, backing sheepishly across the threshold, reaching for his hat and coat.

"Oh pooh! Don't be silly," said Carla, pulling him back through the doorway. "Now, don't you dare fret or feel the lest bit out of sorts, Detective. Mrs. Banister is expecting you this evening so she had me set a place just for you."

"Really!" he snickered, feeling like a waif who was just offered a bag of cookies. *Emm*, he thought, anticipating the taste of those



succulent smells that were watering his pallet, and drivel collected at the corners of his mouth; he could hardly wait to eat. As he glanced expectantly around the foyer, he nearly forgot why he had come.

“It’s been some span between home-cooked menus, eh Detective?” Carla White nudged him in the rib, and his face flushed when he considered how silly he must look ogling their food.

Perhaps, he thought, as silly as a blowfish pressed against an aquarium with its gills fully expanded and its gibbous eyes peering through at a looking glass.

Simpering shamefully broad, the lieutenant detective conceded, “It’s that obvious?”

“Fraid so.”

“I guess it has been longer than I even realized. Man, time sure flies when you’re buried in work.”

“You been hidin’ quite a spell from somethin’, eh, Detective?”

Wise old broad, he thought, as he considered an answer.

“Don’t worry,” she winked, with another elbow to his rib cage, “I’ll look after you.”

“Promise?”

She nodded. “I’ll be diligent at it.”

“My, then I’m in good hands, aren’t I.” She nodded again. “Thanks, Ms. Carla, you’re an angel,” he said, feeling comfortable enough to lean over and kiss her forehead then affectionately tap her chin.

“Hah,” she blared, whacking his arm as she tried concealing her rosy cheeks. “Get on in here now and make yourself at home. I’ll get Mrs. Banister for you.”

Carla White headed into the dining room and closed the large double doors behind her, then she called up to her mistress on the kitchen service phone.

* * * * *

Symbolic trappings of Dr. Jonathan Everet Banister’s unseen presence filled the spacious foyer as post-1812 tapestry—adorned by dark scenes of strapping horses rearing in anger—hung from redwood panels. Snarling foam and snorting flame, the animals’ gaping muzzles frayed at their bits, their thick necks bulged against heavy veins, and their muscular bodies defied the raging storm of war as cannons flailed at the wind. Their mounts, Frenchmen and British soldiers, speared

one another with bayonets; blood spilling from gaping wounds—both man and beast—seemingly oozed from the mural tapestry.

Other tapestry weaved scenes of ships afire—flames shooting through portholes and masts jutting above dark billowy haze, the gray clouds interrupted only by brief shoots of orange kindle exploding into a black pool called the Chesapeake. The ships' final resting place, the bottom of the bay. From a distance, the American flag peered through staunch smoke to prove Fort McHenry a garrison.

Underneath the center tapestry stood a tilt top table, its lion claws gripping the marble floor. Atop the table rested a replica of Englishman Charles Wright's 18th century silver Tea Urn; etched behind its ivory spigot handle, an ivory coat of arms patterned after the Banister bearings. In the middle of the foyer, just in front of the wide staircase, lay a blue Persian rug: oval in shape. At the landing, just before the staircase divided to a double flight, sat an antique high-back Chippendale loveseat. Rich mahogany balustrade spanned the length of the staircase, curving around the second floor landing where four heavy mahogany doors stood in plain view, each obviously leading into a bedroom.

For what seemed an eternity the lieutenant detective browsed the foyer, scanning for any overlooked clue that would lead him to Dr. Banister's whereabouts. In a corner next to the front door, he noticed a stack of mail lying inside a finely weaved brass basket; he grabbed a handful to skim, but every envelope was unopened and addressed to Jonathan E. Banister, Ph.D.

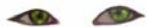
"Hmm, I wonder why Mrs. Banister hasn't opened her husband's mail," he pondered under breath. "There could be a lead in one of these letters." He tossed the stack back inside the brass basket with the rest of the pile just as Melissa Banister descended the upper flight of stairs.

"Detective Johnson." He jerked around, startled. "How are you this evening?" she asked from the landing, not wary of the guilt fleeing across his face.

"Hello, Mrs. Banister. I'm just fine, but please—" he swallowed hard, "call me Stan. And how are you?" His tongue felt thick, his words seemed gobbled: embarrassment hot on his face for nearly being discovered sifting her mail, covertly.

"Oh," she sighed wearily, "holding my own, considering." A bitter laugh and upraised brow punctuated her reply. "Carla has informed you that you'll be dining with us this evening, hasn't she?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you. It was a welcomed surprise."



“Good. One favor though—” His brows raised in query. “The children, they are already on edge and have been through more than enough. Your unexpected presence this evening has no doubt made them a bit more apprehensive than usual. I do not want them feeling things have taken a turn for the worse; after all, it may only be another case to you, Detective, but it is their father we will be discussing this evening. So please, do not bring up my husband’s case in front of them,” she sternly warned him. “Just keep the conversation light with pleasantries . . . at least until after supper.”

“Understood.”

“Good. Now that that is settled, shall we.” She extended a hand and escorted the officer through the large double doors to his right.

CHAPTER THREE

Dinner Shenanigans

Jennifer sat with hands clasped in lap, patiently awaiting the start of dinner; her slouched counterpart, however, fidgeted in his chair, thinking about his father and planning this evening's waylay. When his mother and the dinner guest entered, the boy sat straight up to inspect his quarry. Jennifer was the usual target, but this pigeon could present a bit of a challenge, thought Tony, as he mischievously glared at the lieutenant detective, contemplating how he should handle the assault. *It would have to be both cunning and daring*, he thought, since, after all, this man was himself a trained professional.

"Greet our guest, children," their mother ordered them with a forced pleasantry to her tone.

"Good evening, sir," said Jennifer, brushing a stray hair from her eye and tucking it back under its plait. Carla White had weaved two French braids into one toward the back and fastened a big pink bow at the end of the girl's hair to accent the lace trim bordering her dark green dress.

As if to hide inside his sweater, Tony again slouched down in his chair, but this time he slumped even lower than he had before. The black and red color-splashed fabric gathered at his ears, as would the shell of a partially retracted turtle, and his charcoal eyes peered defiantly out from under a wayward curl that resisted conformance with the feather-cropped hairdo. Tony's policy: Avoid friendly overtures, if possible, at all cost.

"Young man." His mother urged him with a gentle tone to the casual listener, but her eyes sliced the boy to a quarter of his size.

Tony clasped his arms tightly against his chest. "Hello . . . Sir."

"Hello, Tony. Jennifer. Thank you for inviting me to dinner."

"Umph, wasn't my idea," grunted Tony.

"Well, thank you just the same."

"Why don't you take that seat there." Melissa Banister pointed to the end chair across from the boy.



Tony perched his rump at the edge of his chair, scowling at the lieutenant detective as he sat down. *How dare you!* he thought, boiling inside and struggling to abate the tears that raged at the corners of his eyes, threatening at any instant to cascade down his cheeks. Tony hated the idea of a male guest dining with them, let alone roosting in his father's spot: as if he belonged. *What nerve!* Tony screamed inside himself, but he tempered his anger to await a more opportune moment—the moment when he would begin the calculated affront on this . . . *Intruder!* After all, he reasoned, his mother merely invited the freeloader to dinner as a polite gesture, especially since he had already weaseled his way into their home on the pretense of interviewing her, coincidentally around any normal family's dinner hour. *Yeah right!* thought Tony.

"Emm, it all looks delicious," said the officer, not considering the boy's kindled hostility toward him. His eyes inhaled the table, it set with fine china and flanked by cinnamon rolls and two pitchers of freshly brewed ice tea; a carafe of red wine served as its centerpiece.

"Detective Johnson, uh, Stan," cooed Melissa Banister with a warm smile.

Tony and Jennifer gawked at each other in momentary confusion then snapped their heads back around to the adults; disgust fermented behind the boy's eyes as he watched his mother make a spectacle of herself. He could not believe that she was actually playing up to this . . . slime-ball cop. *Probably one of the dirty dozen*, griped Tony to himself.

Mama can't be that naive. It's more obvious than those black olives on that table there. How come she can't see he's merely waiting to make his move, maybe nail her to the wall as a prime suspect? Can't she tell he's just scheming, sitting there so smug in Dad's chair? Tony rolled his eyes and flipped a wayward curl off of his forehead. I guess I'm more cunning than Mama, so I'll have to protect her.

"We were so delighted to hear you could join us for dinner this evening," added Melissa Banister, not wary of her son's chafed opinion of her.

Teesth, slime-ball. Tony shifted angrily in his chair, sounding a discordant screech as the legs scooted along the hardwood floor.

"It's not often we have the pleasure of entertaining company; besides, it seems we've known you for months now, Detective, yet we're actually still strangers."

Tony leered at his mother with painful shame, discontent heavy on his heart. "More than you know, Mama," he said under breath, not realizing she was merely being cordial.

How can she be so naive.

Now was about the time Tony Banister would begin his favorite routine, agitating his sister, and right about now his mother cautioned him with a whipping glare to behave—or else. Tony misread the warning signal and considered it a stance against his objection to this encroacher, which further angered the boy.

The lieutenant detective was about to respond to Melissa Banister's kindness when in rattled Carla White from the kitchen. Extending a service tray toward the officer, she asked, "Would you prefer vegetable soup, Caesar salad or both, Detective?" Her eyes flickered jauntily across the tray she held, encouraging him to try both.

Though clearly delighted, and secretly relishing both items, Stanley Johnson chided himself for being so presumptuous in coming to the Banister home at this hour, and he hesitated to accept the cook's invitation. He was feeling guilty enough for intruding upon their family time, and he did not want to make a glutton of himself. The women were certainly creating a welcoming environment, but Stanley Johnson found solace in scolding his rude invasion, insisting that the meeting be at this particular hour. Not everyone was a workaholic, and the Banister family surely had a life outside of school and work, he quietly chastened himself.

Sensing the lieutenant detective's apprehension, Melissa Banister requested a portion of each dish then, as would any conscientious hostess, suggested that he do likewise. Relaxing a bit, Stanley Johnson followed her lead and finally agreed.

"Thanks, Ms. Carla, both sound wonderful."

"Pig! I bet it does," whispered Tony Banister under breath, but unwittingly his words were audible enough for everyone to have heard.

Uh—oh, fasten your seat belt, Stan ol' boy, this kid's tryin' his darndest to spin your top, he told himself.

Melissa kicked the boy underneath the table; he muffled a silent screech as he looked her way. Her glare sent quivers through his puerile frame: two daggers spearing his heart clean through.

Jennifer snickered because of Tony's reprimand, and her mother growled, "Young Lady!" then her heart dithered too. However, unlike her older brother, she cleverly directed the attention away from her own pending fate on to the dinner guest.

With the most adoring eyes that she could muster, the little girl flashed her ivory teeth as she inquired, "Detective Johnson, would you care for a cinnamon roll? I think these are my most favorite part of



dinner.” Though a mere child, Jennifer Banister had already mastered the feminine wile of bewitching. She batted her eyes and pulled a strudel apart; rolling it between her small, inexperienced palms, then she popped it awkwardly into her mouth.

Tony wheeled his eyes under their lids and sighed, “Oh brother.”

The lieutenant detective chuckled as he answered, “Why, thank you, honey. I would love a cinnamon roll.”

Smitten by his charm, Jennifer’s sapphire amulets sparkled big in their sockets; she could hardly believe that this gorgeous blue-eyed hunk had just called her *Honey*! She had ridden a crush for him for months—and now he called her Honey. *Wow*, thought Jennifer, sighing as quietly as she could, hoping no one took notice. Miss Jennifer Banister, now feeling truly grown-up, flapped her little legs underneath the table and melted into the chair as she watched the corners of her lieutenant detective’s mouth crinkle up to a diminutive grin, dimples on each cheek.

“No one but Daddy has ever called me that!” she gasped, wide-eyed and forcing a rising lump back down her throat.

“Oh grow up, Donkey,” snapped her brother. Tony and Jennifer bickered wildly back and forth then suddenly stopped. Feeling the cool stare of their mother’s eye, they slowly turned their gaze toward her. As suspected her reproving grimace was upon them; both Tony and Jennifer cringed like shivering pups, eyes fastened upon their taskmaster.

“If you two are having some difficulty controlling yourselves at the dinner table this evening, then you may excuse yourselves—without dessert.”

“Ahhh, no, Mommy, please, we’ll be good.” They both pleaded.

“Okay. But enough of that arguing!”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Tony.

“Yes, ma’am,” mimicked Jennifer.

Stanley Johnson chuckled under breath, enjoying his hostess in action. While everyone finished his meal in silence, the officer reflected over the past several months and how he had grown to admire and respect this woman. Despite the bizarre ordeal through which she daily groped, Melissa Banister managed to preserve her sanity while concurrently rearing two delightfully rambunctious children. The department had not ruled out homicide, nor the wife as a possible suspect, but Stanley Johnson felt deep sympathy for both her

and the children. They were noticeably finding it difficult adjusting to the professor's disappearance, naturally.

Sure, Tony was pretentious, a brat at times, thought Stanley Johnson, but with one birthday already passed and another on its way, he almost anticipated Tony's behavior: a pre-adolescent with raging hormones, without a father to guide him through. Tony was basically a good kid; he and Jennifer were going through so much at such tender ages when most young people were learning more about themselves, discovering a new sense of autonomy. Under normal circumstances these children would be exploring the grounds and everything they could find—*especially with all this land*, thought Stanley Johnson. The Banister children were virtual prisoners of their own home, restricted from many of the same outdoor activities that their peers so freely enjoyed. It seemed as though nearly all their privileges were suspended, even the simplest—an understandable misfortune since their father seems to have vanished from off the face of the earth.

Though by now considered a highly unpalatable scenario, if it were a case of abduction—Dr. Banister being a well respected metaphysicist and the nephew of a former governor—the kidnappers were certainly taking their time in contacting the family, and the children had to be protected, in the event abduction were the case. Only recently had Melissa Banister allowed them to resume school transportation via private bus.

While she pondered her own thoughts and imaginations, cataclysms that may have befallen her husband, the pressure of raising children and living on dwindling finances without an insurance settlement at hand strained Melissa Banister's face. Stanley Johnson knew monetary relief would not come until a body had been found, or at least until a certain amount of time had elapsed. Watching her quiet rage suddenly made him feel personally responsible for this woman beside him. His eyes inhaled every nuance of her face: the shape of her nose, the point of her chin, the stroke of her brow; he even noticed the arch in her wrist as she lifted her fork.

Not wary of his gaze, Melissa Banister moistened her lips then granted the fork and its contents entrance. Stanley Johnson's eyes devoured every move she made: her mouth puckering around the meat, her teeth carefully clasp the instrument so not to smear her lipstick, the fork sliding into view again; his roving eyes followed the utensil pass her rounded breasts and back to the plate. Secretly, he undressed his hostess and pulled her complying body into his warm arms, firmly pressing his brawny chest against her sumptuous frame,



all the while imagining himself leisurely fondling his siren, artfully caressing her lips.

Carla White entered to whisk the remaining food and plates from the table, squelching Stanley Johnson's rated fantasy; she immediately returned carrying a tray of coffee and dessert. "Detective Johnson, would you care for a slice of strawberry shortcake, cheese cake, or freshly baked pecan pie?" Invitingly, she leaned the tray forward.

"Emm, what a choice! I was ready to indulge myself even before you came in," he sheepishly chuckled, secretly rhapsodizing his hostess. "Well they all look scrumptiously delicious. You've made it rather hard to choose, Ms. Carla. So. . .," his fingers hovered gingerly above the dessert tray and landed on a plate of pecan pie. "I think I'll go with my old favorite."

"A la mode?" Carla White grinned with upraised brows, enticing the lieutenant detective to say yes.

"Emm! That sounds too good to refuse, Ms. Carla. Why not?"

Leaning into his ear, she whispered, "I told you I'd look after you. I'm diligent when it comes to keeping my word, you know."

Stanley Johnson smiled then winked with an affirmative nod.

With arms folded tightly under her breasts, Melissa Banister playfully inquired, "What's going on between you and my cook, Stan?" She arched a brow high and slightly puckered her lips, feigning jealous suspicion.

"Uh—oh, Ms. Carla, looks like we've been had."

Reveling the attention, the attractive forty-five-year-old barely contained her blush as she balanced the tray in one hand and, prancing backward and tittering, pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen with the other.

A small woman in stature—five feet, two inches to be exact—Carla White obviously sampled a bit more of her own cooking than probably she should have. Her curly dark hair, cropped at the neck, and ruddy cheeks made her full face seem even rounder. Although she realized it was all said in fun, Carla seldom received this kind of attention from any man, but whenever she did, she was hopelessly forgetful and giddy for at least the remainder of the day.

Neglecting to serve the Banister family their dessert, she walked back into the dining room, chortling; her already flushed cheeks rosied even redder for embarrassment.

O brother! thought Tony. You may have charmed the ladies of this family but not me, Buck-A-Roo. All this make nicety-nice chitchat crap is making me sick!

To stir up some action, Tony plopped a serving spoon into a corner of his mouth and, in the most convincing Sherlock Holmes diction he could muster, began an interrogation.

“So, Detective Johnson, what exactly are you doing about my father?” Tony hammered the spoon against a plate for effect’s sake.

Everyone fell to an uncomfortable silence, except Carla White. She nearly dropped the silverware she carried. Quickly, she retrieved every utensil then went back to the kitchen. Melissa Banister readied her eyes to bore into the boy’s hide, but knowing the visual warning was most certainly aimed and ready to fire, he refused to glimpse her way. His eyes stayed fixed upon the lieutenant detective, who realized Tony Banister was just attempting to exercise his authority as the little man of the house, and for that he admired the boy.

Contemplating how he should handle Tony, Stanley Johnson recalled Mrs. Banister’s earlier request: “Keep the conversation light,” she had said. Unfortunately, Tony Banister had not been apprised of that same ruling; obviously.

“Well!” impatiently he barked, demanding an answer.

The lieutenant detective glanced toward Melissa Banister. Mortified by her son’s brazen attempt to turn dinner into a British inquest, her rich golden complexion had drained to a sallow green hue. Coughing to clear his throat, and to buy himself a few extra seconds, the lieutenant detective answered, “Tony, I understand you’re anxious to learn any information pertaining to your father, but . . . son, just like you I have to follow my captain’s orders, and as your captain, your mother should be the one to discuss your father’s case with you and your sister—not me. But I will tell you this . . . We are all working very hard to find your daddy for you.”

“Promise?” asked Jennifer.

“Promise.”

No matter how gentle the lieutenant detective’s approach, Tony Banister had been successfully shot down, deflated from the status of the Little Man of Twelve to a sniveling child of five.

Pleading his argument, Tony whimpered, “But I’m the man of the house while Dad’s away. He told me I was in charge of everything while he’s gone.”



Stanley Johnson and Melissa Banister stared at each other hopeful that this was the piece of information for which they had been searching all these months. As benign as he could possibly respond, the lieutenant detective questioned the boy. "Tony, when did your father tell you this?"

Melissa Banister heard a quiver of hope ring in the lieutenant detective's tone. *Maybe Tony has heard from Jon*, she thought, squeezing her eyes shut as she held her breath, anticipating his answer.

"He always told me I was in charge before he left on business trips."

"Son, think carefully now— Did he tell you he was leaving this time on business?" Tony shook his head timidly no. "Are you sure— did you talk with your daddy about him leaving beforehand?" Again Tony nodded no. Dazed and confused, his eyes darted about the room, fearful of the probing questions. Jennifer's eyes began to mist with tears in sympathy for her brother's dilemma. "Did he put you in charge before he left this time?"

"Well, maybe not officially this time, but he always did before," Tony defended with a tractable whimper, soft and uncertain.

Detective Johnson released a hard sigh. "And, son, you're doing a fine job taking care of your mama and sister. I know it's a big responsibility but you must stay strong for them, like your daddy is. Now you know he wouldn't want you to do anything contrary to what your mama wants, right?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Alright then. Your mother will explain to you both everything she feels you should know, when the time is right." As the officer spoke, Tony Banister's little heart sank submissively to the pit of his stomach, acid churning despair into knots. "Now I know it's hard for you two, but try not to worry too much for your mama's sake, okay?" Tony and Jennifer nodded yes. "Will you both make it a promise, hmm?" Again they nodded yes. "Okay then, shake."

Jennifer immediately wrapped both her little palms around the officer's hand. With that wayward curl kissing his brow, Tony languidly sauntered from the other end of the table to also seal the pack.

"Okay then, it's settled. And we'll do everything we can to find your dad for you. Okay?" Stanley Johnson's liquid blue orbs twinkled as he smiled and brushed that wayward curl out of Tony's eye. "I'll try to be here as much as I can for you; ask me what you will . . . about

anything—except this case!” he smiled gingerly. “That’s your mama’s department. And from what I’ve seen here tonight, I don’t want to tangle with her.” Jennifer giggled. Tony only gave a cursory glance toward his mother; however, his body language revealed the subtly concession.

Leaning on the table with hands clenched under jaw, Melissa Banister sat watching, quietly impressed by how well the lieutenant detective retained control over the matter yet, at the same time, preserved a delicate balance of respect toward her eldest child, avoiding, as much as he possibly could, bruising the lad’s developing sense of family duty.

Humming to herself, Carla White began clearing dessert dishes, unaware her timely entrance had thwarted the enmity that brewed in the corridors of a child’s mind.

“More coffee, anyone?”

Stanley Johnson and Melissa Banister declined, but with a playful snicker, Jennifer tried her luck. “I’ll have some . . . black if you please, madam.” She had picked up a phrase or two from watching Classic TV.

Ignoring the child’s frisky bid, Melissa clapped her hands. “All right, kiddies, you’ve had your fill; run along and go get ready for bed. I’ll be up in a bit to tuck you in and say good night.”

Tony stood up, petitioning, “Not me, Mama. I’m getting much too old for that sort of thing, you know.” His eyes flashed toward the lieutenant detective then carefully back to his mother.

“Oh, yes of course, Tony. How silly of me.” Melissa posed a loving smirk toward Stanley Johnson; Tony stepped aside to allow his younger sibling the childish bedtime indulgence.

Jennifer leaned over to kiss her mother and whispered, “I’ll never get too big for you, Mommy. I promise. Hurry upstairs, okay?” she pleaded; a twinkling smile emerged upon her face as she smeared the lipstick that had transferred from her mother’s lips across her own. Melissa patted the child’s bottom and kissed her cheek, hard.

After they said good night to the detective, Tony yelled, “Last one to the top of the stairs ‘a rotten egg,” then he dashed up the steps two at a time. Jennifer tried to slow him down by grabbing his pant leg, but Tony wiggled free, never slowing his stride.

“No that’s not fair!” Jennifer squealed. “I’m littler than you. One step, Tony! No—one step I said.”



Tony ignored her demands, laughing as he whooped, “Donkey, Donkey, Don-ke-ke-ke-key,” and continued lunging up the stairs. “Ha, ha, ha, ha! You can’t catch me.” He sang to torment the child. “Donkey, Donkey, Don-ke-ke-ke-key. The Donkey can’t catch me.” Tony laughed even louder.

“Shut up!” shrilled Jennifer, as they flung open their bedroom doors then slammed them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Memories

Melissa shook her head and rolled her eyes, sighing with a mother's affection. When she noticed that Stanley Johnson was watching her, she returned the gaze, momentarily, then they both began to laugh.

"You know, I remember when I was Tony's age," reminisced Stan with fond adoration. "I loved taunting my little sister too—boy did I love her—and even though she got really enraged by it, it was just incredibly too much fun to stop. I couldn't help myself sometimes. Her little cheeks would get all ruddy and hot. I tell you, the things I did to her . . . that girl had heart. She wouldn't let me get away with anything for too long; she kept coming back for more, probably 'cause it was just the two of us, like Tony and Jennifer."

"Yes, I know what you mean. I harassed my little brother, but my reason was probably more so to teach him a lesson in Women's Lib." Melissa visualized her brother's fat cheeks swelling as they spouted short puffs of air at each new setback, inflating and deflating like taut little balloons. "He would get so chagrined with me, especially when we got older because I, though his big sister, still a mere girl, usually got the better of him. I wouldn't stop teasing either." Melissa bit the lower corner of her lip as she gazed into space, searching her memory for some of the more humiliating feats she had accomplished against her brother.

"Oh yes, I would make him carry Gram's purse through the grocery store. Come to think of it, Tony did that same thing to Jennifer, but it didn't have quite the same impact that he was aiming for; she just pretended she was an elegant lady about town. I tell you, girls these days are in such a rush to grow up. I was still playing with frogs and dolls when I was Jennifer's age. She'd rather play in my make-up bag and wear lace. Oh yes . . .

"I remember a time when my mother visited us at Gram's—that's who we lived with, you know, our grandmother—anyway, I told Ralph that Mother's tampons were magic wands, and I showed him how they absorbed nearly any kind of liquid imagined, to be saved for later—"



“Oh, no. You didn’t.”

“I did, but wait, you haven’t heard the best. A few days later in the grocery store, this lady breaks a jar of cranberry juice and good-little-too-do-gooder races to the rescue, mopping up the spillage with the magic wand that she had dropped from her purse. Just as management gets there to help, Ralph is handing her the sopped up juice, and he proudly announces, ‘There you go, lady. You can drink it later; it’ll still be good.’ And he proceeded to show the poor woman how to extract the juice from her magic wand.”

“Oh gross. Really?” Stanley Johnson was not quite certain if he wanted to laugh or gag, but he forced a minor chuckle to appease Melissa Banister.

“Yes. He was only five then; it was easy to pull the wool over his eyes.” Melissa cackled, not noticing the lieutenant detective’s awkward look. “Tony heard me tell the story to Carla one day then played that same trick on Jennifer, the little trickster; she took a *magic wand* to school for Show and Tell.”

“Oh no, how embarrassing.”

“For the teacher— The other second graders seemed just as impressed by the wand’s magic as was Jennifer. Mrs. Pitterman called me a little concerned, but by the end of our conversation, we both had a pretty good chuckle, of course after she strongly suggested that I give both children a good talking to.”

“I don’t know if I can top that story,” admitted Stanley Johnson, secretly hoping that his hostess would exit memory lane, leaving behind such tales as that of the magic wand.

Melissa Banister lowered her eyes and a fond smile shimmered across their path; she shook her head envisioning her darlings. The soft hues of her gray irises, full of life and twinkling, warmed Stanley Johnson’s heart. Loosing himself in the midst of her salient orbs, he never took his eyes from off of her; many times he had longed to be alone with Melissa in an intimate setting such as this, yet now that they were alone, he was practically speechless. He watched her mouth pucker and round as she engaged in colloquy, her slender fingertips occasionally glinting across his arm as she made a point here and there. No longer able to constrain his feelings, he found himself saying, “You look absolutely ravishing in that dress.”

Melissa Banister’s cheeks flushed; she nervously shifted the chair and fidgeted with her pearl wristband. Though her sultry eyes were safely tucked in her lap, she stole a glimpse at the lieutenant detective: his gaze still fixed upon her. He ingested every angle of her face, every

turn of her figure, the curve of her lips, the bend of her neck; his eyes tasted her all over and she quivered, shifting the chair again.

"You're making me blush. Please stop." The words barely escaped her lips. He tried to comply but could not fully, and she impulsively stood. "Let's go into the study." Without waiting, Melissa headed out the door.

Stanley Johnson sat a moment, touring her body while it shimmied under the red evening dress—her hips rhythmically gliding from side to side as she ambled through the foyer; the bodice plunging to a deep-V just above her round buttocks; a side-slit revealing her calf: *A dancer's calf*, thought Stanley Johnson.

Ahh, this is the life. Nice house. Maid. Kids . . . A beautiful wife. What a lucky stiff Jon is—was!

The lieutenant detective wrestled thoughts of resentment as he rose from the dinner table to follow the missing man's wife. He glanced around the study from the doorway, not the first time, eyeing its masculine effects with contempt. Jonathan Banister's firmly proclaimed presence stamped everywhere, his beautiful wife watching the officer from a burgundy leather sofa that was arranged in a semi-circle with two matching oversize chairs around the hearth.

Above the large fireplace hung a portrait of the missing professor, seated; his family coddling around him, stood. His flaming red hair, cropped military style, had a few wayward strands breaching the ranks as though static had given them a new order. Gold wire-frame glasses masked the scowl he wore, but the lieutenant detective still noticed it: those cold, beady green eyes staring out from under bushy red brows gazing purposely down upon the officer, mocking him by virtue of his family: not the all-American archetype, rather an all-American hodgepodge; nonetheless, something that Stanley Johnson did not have.

Stan glanced down into a brass umbrella stand left of him and recognized a small ball of orange paper, the same ball of paper he had seen several times before, but he had never really considered it until now. Not wanting to draw it attention, he dare not remove the scrap of paper with Melissa present. He continued scanning the study for anything out of the ordinary, but there was nothing different to detect, only that Melissa Banister had drawn the heavy red and gold macramé hanging over the big picture window to his left.

The mirrored bar at his right caught his eye; its counter-top, trimmed in burgundy leather, shelved several crystal decanters, each filled to capacity. Cut crystal hung from the ceiling of the chiseled



mahogany bar, dancing with the colors of the liquids beneath them. Three mahogany high-back stools beckoned Stanley Johnson closer—come . . . sit . . . indulge. He scrolled his pasty tongue across parched lips, thirsting for a drink.

A few feet pass the mirrored bar was a heavy mahogany desk; behind it, a bas-relief bookcase overflowing with literature and knickknacks; left of the case, a sizable black door with paneled relief. Struggling to recall where it led, Stanley Johnson quietly pondered, *Is that the library?* He occasionally lost his bearings in that grand home.

“Well, Detective, tell me the news.”

Muddling through the cognizant lapse, feeling the haze of a trance-like quandary, the lieutenant detective stared blankly at his hostess. Melissa Banister’s words had crashed his silent monologue like a lightning bolt splintering a tree.

“You know . . . the reason you insisted we meet this evening.” Her tone, poignantly cool, urged the officer to his point of business; his intrusive advances had clearly irritated her. Stanley Johnson noticed that she no longer spoke with a familiar tone in her voice.

“Uh, yes . . . that’s right, Mrs. Banister,” he cleared his throat as he started toward her, but hesitated, collecting his thoughts. “Well, you see, ma’am, uhh, the captain planned to file this case in the Abyss—”

“The Abyss! How ghastly. What is that?”

“I’m sorry, that’s just station jargon for suspended cases that haven’t been solved but are unofficially closed because all the available leads are dead end trails. And we’ve turned up about zippo on Dr. Banister’s case. You see, Mrs. Banister, we only have so much manpower, and well . . . the captain says we’ve already spent a lot of time on this case here. I think upstairs flack is coming down on him ‘cause other cases are suffering. We only have so much manpower,” he repeated, half pleading and hoping that she understood the Department’s dilemma.

Melissa Banister’s gray eyes darkened as they angled up at the lieutenant detective; she piqued that he could actually say this to her, especially after he set his feet under her dining table, ate her food, then made those improper advances toward her.

“Do you mean to tell me that you won’t be looking for my husband any longer, Detective?” Her words hissed against her tongue like a kettle of hot seething coals doused by water.

“No, that’s not exactly the case, Mrs. Banister. We would still keep an eye out for him if any new leads came our way, but other than

that— Yes, there wouldn't be as many of us looking. I'm sorry, uh, ma'am, but we are daily bombarded by new cases with fresher leads that deserve their fair shake at follow-up attention, you know . . . or else they'll get stale—begging your pardon—like this case here. They're barely getting investigated now because there's a shortage of manpower because of, well . . . partly because we do have so much manpower still working this case, since, uh, well, you know . . . Dr. Banister being a prominent physicist, not to mention the former governor's nephew. I've strung this investigation out as long as I could, using the clout that his name pulls, but just like Captain Packard warned, a lot of leads are getting sour. Besides, Mrs. Banister, without sufficient evidence to backup a murder theory—"

"MURDER!" His words rang harshly against her eardrums, strumming a dissonant chord. Never before had anyone admitted straight out their suspicions of murder—Jonathan Banister, kidnapped . . . yes, possibly; but not murdered.

Stanley Johnson felt like a babbling idiot, but the woman had to be told, he reasoned. "Yes, ma'am, but also there's a real good chance your husband . . . well, ma'am, he may actually be, well, uh, some say, uh . . . a deserter."

"A DESERTER!"

Uh—oh. Stanley Johnson braced himself for the full-impact of this woman's wrath. *I really put my foot in it now.*

"Now see here, Detective Johnson! my husband may be many things, but let me assure you right here and now—he is no deserter!" A finger wagged violently in the air; she posted the other hand at her hip.

"Yes, Ma'am, but—"

"And STOP calling me MA'AM! I'm no old maid. Do you see any old maids around here!"

"Uhh, yes Ma'a-aah—I mean no, Ma'a . . . ugh! Mrs. Banister, please, calm down. If you'll just hold on to your horses and allow me to finish, I could tell you that I don't believe it either!" he shouted barely above the din of hysterics.

Melissa Banister's wild-eyed rage, aimed directly at the officer, was instantly quelled. Attentively she listened to his explanation, but her smoldering eyes were empty, missing a mindful soul to share the space: her thoughts in the distance. Stanley Johnson spoke fast, before she interjected.



“Especially since I’ve stumbled across something I feel is kind of peculiar. I’d like to share it with you, if I may. Please, Mrs. Banister, don’t look at me like I’m the bad guy. I’m trying to do the best I can to help you, but only with your cooperation, ma’a—uh, Mrs. Banister, can I help. This was the only possible way I could think of to keep this file active and out of the Abyss. That’s why I thought it urgent to come right over—tonight. Every minute counts. This case’s got limited life on the active shelf. It’s been hard keeping the hounds from tossing it to the Abyss, uhh . . . suspending it. I mean no offense,” he said, carefully observing her smoldering gray eyes.

“I’m sorry, Detective.” Melissa fought to restrain a wave of tears, but they gushed forth when she clarified herself: “Ever since my husband . . . vanished everything has become so-so hectic. The things he usually handles are falling by the wayside because I just don’t know what to do with it all—I don’t know what I’m doing!—he never showed me how to do any of this stuff, and . . . well, frankly, I never really bothered to ask. I guess it’s all my fault I don’t know. I took for granted he would always be around. And now I’m just so anxious nearly every moment of the day. I want my husband back, Detective Johnson. I don’t want him to be—to be . . . Oh, I just don’t even want to think it! All I want is for Jonathan to come home, so things can be the way they were—well . . . at least normal.

“I’m willing to do whatever it takes at whatever price to bring him home,” professed Melissa Banister, but when she considered the oath she shivered. To contemplate the “whatever necessary” action she may have to take to prove the oath made her tongue undulate against the roof of her mouth, and a rotten pit plunged to Melissa’s belly, burning the whole way down. She forced a dry swallow to the back of her throat.

The lieutenant detective noticed her tugging nervously at the pearl wristband, and accurately he surmised she was not totally convinced herself that she would truly do whatever it took to regain her missing husband. Although he believed her sincerity in wanting him home, something was just not gelling. She was shading the truth. Still, he could not help but admire her stoic confidence; he yearned to comfort and protect her, to shelter her from the harsh world and its unscrupulous realities. The lieutenant detective also realized he had to shove those maudlin feelings aside if he wanted to remain impartial in this investigation and learn what hidden truths she would tell.

Adrift in her own thoughts, Melissa Banister waded through images of her husband and children to the myriad of problems with

which Jonathan Banister had left her. When she glanced toward the lieutenant detective, she sensed an overwhelming sadness draining him, yet he did not appear sad. Little did she know, her assumptions were on target, but Stanley Johnson had perfected the art of masking behind aloof professionalism, a trait she had come to know during the nearly year-long investigation—that is, barring the peccadillo he earlier committed at the dinner table.

Though secretly savoring the attention, guilt plagued Melissa Banister; she resented her heart for longing to hear her husband say the things the lieutenant detective had said to her. *Jon would never give me the pleasure of hearing him say I looked sexy, even if he were here*, she reasoned.

Melissa Banister admired Stanley Johnson's authoritative style; it made her feel safe and secure, as though she were in good hands: protective, caring hands. Strange, she thought, how could she feel this way for the very person investigating her husband's possible murder?

MURDER! Oh goodness! She shuddered. UGH. Suspiring hard, she reasoned with herself. He doesn't really like me. Stop being so silly, Girl! she quietly chided. You're a married woman. Yes! but he's gone, and without a trace. Don't you have any remorse. Why, you're a suspect: probably his number one suspect! Well, he's not going to trap me for—

"Mrs. Banister? Mrs. Banister?" the lieutenant detective's faint call sounded from a distant tunnel. "Mrs. Banister?"

"Oh yes, Detective—Stan"; her reply, coyly pleasant; her smile, suspiciously sweet; yet, Melissa Banister assured herself that she would be more cunning than the lieutenant detective. She would find out what he really wanted from her, what he knew. "I'm sorry, please go on. You were saying?" her tone, wavering on uncertainty, slid up to the last syllable.

The lieutenant detective's eyes narrowed as he pondered Melissa Banister's thoughts. This was not the same desperate woman who just moments ago, with tears in her eyes, confessed that she would do anything to reclaim her husband. She now seemed detached and oddly cool. Stanley Johnson noted the change of behavior then proceeded:

"Mrs. Banister, I took a final look in the log cabin earlier this morning with a forensic team of investigators, and—"

"Why didn't you ask me first!"

"Oh . . ." He eyed her askance. "Well, ma'am, since this is still an on-going investigation, I saw little need to consult you. I know it's been some time since we were last up there—"



He noticed that she flinched. Stanley Johnson recalled the same subtle reaction once before when his partner Bill Taylor mentioned in passing conversation the little cabin's charm. He thought her reaction strange then, too. Had he known she always cowered at the thought of that place, he would have probed deeper to better understand why. But her reasons were too painful to readily volunteer; she dodged the issue whenever anyone approached the subject. It was one of her darkest memories, causing her undeserved shame for having allowed the secret its longevity.

Detecting a tinge of pain flash across her eye, Stan wondered why the mere mention of the cabin made her so uneasy. He was genuinely concerned for what had chafed her mentally, but he had to pursue this line of questioning to uncover, with certainty, what she was thinking. *It may just help solve this case*, he thought, deciding that no matter what the outcome, he would pry from her the details.

"Is there something wrong, Mrs. Banister?"

She nervously shifted on the burgundy couch, twisting the flexible wristband hard around her fingertips; her other hand, frail and trembling, fondled the matching pearl necklace, coiling it around a finger. "Oh . . . no," her words betrayed her as they escaped a rising lump in her throat; her blushing smile, meant to imply his question absurd, failed its assignment. "Why do you ask?" she managed a calmer repartee.

"Well, for starters, you look as pale as a ghost." Melissa Banister was never good at masking her feelings. "What's wrong, is it the cabin?"

The question coursed her bowels with the force of a shock wave. *People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones*, her mother would say on visits. The aftermath left Melissa's nerves quaking.

Stanley Johnson fixed his eyes carefully upon the woman, imagining himself a cat stalking its prey: she was trapped. She shifted again uneasily then twirled that pearl necklace between her fingers, but this time harder. She was running from some awful memory—that he understood. He hesitated to go in for the kill, but her secret had to be exposed.

Melissa wrapped her arms tightly around both knees, curled her legs underneath her feet, and huddled in a corner of the couch. She looked so vulnerable and alone, almost child-like. As Stan pondered her unspoken thoughts, his visage changed. *Does she know about—? Naabb*, he convinced himself, releasing a quiet sigh then chuckled. *After all these years, that still haunts me. Ridiculous.*

Realizing her fears were poorly masked, Melissa resigned herself to telling the truth, but not the whole truth. Never could she tell the whole truth—not to anyone! That kind of exposure was unbearable, she thought, and instantly, she felt nakedness and empty. To even think of telling it made Melissa quiver.

“Detective . . . uh, Stan,” she struggled to compose herself again, “that cabin holds many memories for me: some pleasant, some not so pleasant. As you know, Jon was—is a physicist, but his passion is ontology. He apportions much of his time and studies to discovering the Unknown and to acquiring knowledge on the Mysteries of Life: why different things occur. In short, my husband, uh, *geared* all his talents and resources toward this end. All his training in archeology, tribal rituals, physics, *were poured* into his research. Nothing stood in his way. Nearly every waking hour, probably every sleeping hour, he lived—s, breathes and thinks metaphysics. It’s his passion to discover the reason things happen in life, particularly . . . well,” she balked at disclosing details, “you know, things like why a dog may sense the pain, or even death, of his beloved master—and other rather peculiar forms of intuitions such as that. Jon use to take us up to that cabin for vacation, only it was no vacation . . . at least not for me.” Melissa sighed, her face drawn in sadness. “Look, Stan, I really don’t want to go on, okay,” she said curtly.

He stared at her, palming his stubbled chin and noticeably more puzzled than he seemed before. The cabin’s tucked away in a beautiful, romantic setting, close to a lake, surrounded by giant trees, with a rambling river running through the woods. How could such a darling place possibly hold bad memories, he marveled.

Glancing up from her lap, Melissa met his gaze; instinctively, she knew his thoughts as they formed in his mind. “Oh sure, the kids had a great time fishing and romping through the woods all day long.” Reminiscing her most prized jewels, she chuckled. “I know it’s hard to believe because of Tony’s cruel pranks, but he and Jennifer are actually quite close—”

“It’s not hard to believe, Mrs. Banister.”

“Well . . . good,” her eyes blinked rapidly, she not recalling their earlier conversation and trading of sibling rivalry tales, “Cause they really do enjoy each other’s company. They adore each other. Besides, these little excursions afforded Tony the perfect opportunity to play the prankster. Anyway, Jon always managed to disappear off to some place or another to conclude, or begin, an experiment on some terribly important breakthrough that could never seem to wait another



precious moment. Nothing ever could bear to wait until after our so-called family excursions—ever! I tell you, I sometimes wondered why he even bothered.”

The lieutenant detective grunted under breath, remembering someone he once knew. A workaholic, his associate could never wait for a more appropriate time to start or finish a project, either. His persistent work ethics interrupted their so-called lives. In the long run, it cost Stan a marriage.

A few years before he quit, Stanley Johnson was made partner: It was an empty title; he was never recognized officially as such, yet by the end of his stint he had done more than his fair share of the work. His boss slash friend handed out miserly praise crumbs to appease the naive young comrade, though his theories alone progressed the project—eventually.

“While I, of course, was usually left alone in that dreadful cabin,” continued Melissa Banister, unaware the officer had digressed from the conversation.

Though sympathetic of her plight, the scenic paradox still baffled him. Encouraging her to expound, he asked, “Why do you describe the cabin as dreadful, Mrs. Banister? I understand your husband may have been a workaholic, but it still looks like an adorable little cottage to me.”

“Looks can be deceiving, Detective.” She scoured him with a piercing sidelong gaze. Unmistakably she was irritated by his comment and by the tenor of his query. As she rose from the sofa, her eyes stayed fixed upon him, and while she kindled a fire, quietly she contemplated, *Does he really need my help to keep the file from going into this so-called Abyss! Or, is he just toying with me, secretly plotting to entrap me with this interrogation routine?*

On her way to the foyer, Melissa turned to him and coolly she remarked, “I’ll be back, Detective. Try not to get into anything too personal while you’re keeping yourself entertained—*hmm*. I have to check on my children, tuck them in for the evening.”

“Of course, Mrs. Banister,” he answered pleasantly, hoping not to rile the woman any further.

Realizing she had spoken a bit too curtly, Melissa softened her tone, repeating the gesture of hospitality. “Detective, please make yourself at home. I won’t be too long.”

He smiled with a gracious nod. “Thank you, ma’a—uh . . . Mrs. Banister.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Stealth Mission

Determined to learn more than what had been uncloaked during dinner, Tony Banister crept back downstairs when he was sure Carla White had finished her evening errands. *After all*, he reasoned, *any good Holmes would do exactly the same*. When he saw his mother's foot step across the study threshold, his face flushed red and he turned to run, but she had already caught hold of his ear. Tony was more shamed and embarrassed that his undercover mission had been foiled than for spying on his mother and the officer.

While she led him upstairs by an ear, Tony pleaded softly, "I'm sorry, Mama. I just wanted to know what he was going to tell you about Dad."

"Well, what ever he was going to say to me was none of your business! I oughta—"

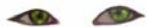
"Now you know, Mama, a good detective always follows his best lead, even to the bitter end, regardless of personal risk or consequence to his own safety and health," interjected Tony, hoping to bribe his way out of the almost certain destiny that his bottom faced.

"Uh—huh."

His boyish grin fastly faded behind a weightier cast, it encroaching the puerile visage. Tony's eyes frisked her face; his inquisitive nature took charge. "Mama, did the cabin have something to do with Dad's disappearance?"

Releasing the ear, Melissa grabbed Tony's hand and opened the bedroom door. She whispered, "Hush, sweetie," and led him inside. "Get into bed and stop cluttering your mind with so much worry," she said, patting his bottom as Tony climbed under the blankets. "Warm enough?"

"Emm-hmm"; he nodded. His eyes were filled with devotion as he stared up at Melissa. She leaned across Tony to tuck the covers around him. *Emm, rose petals*. Tony smiled as he sniffed her skin. His eyes continue to search her face for an explanation as she brushed a curl from his brow.



“I don’t know yet if the cabin had anything to do with Dad’s case, sweetie. The detective didn’t say.” She kissed his forehead. Tony frowned.

“Mama, I’m much too big now to be tucked in and kissed like this.” He raked his fist across that spot.

“Shhh, it’ll be our lil’ secret”; she winked.

“In that case, put it here.” Tony puckered his round pink lips.

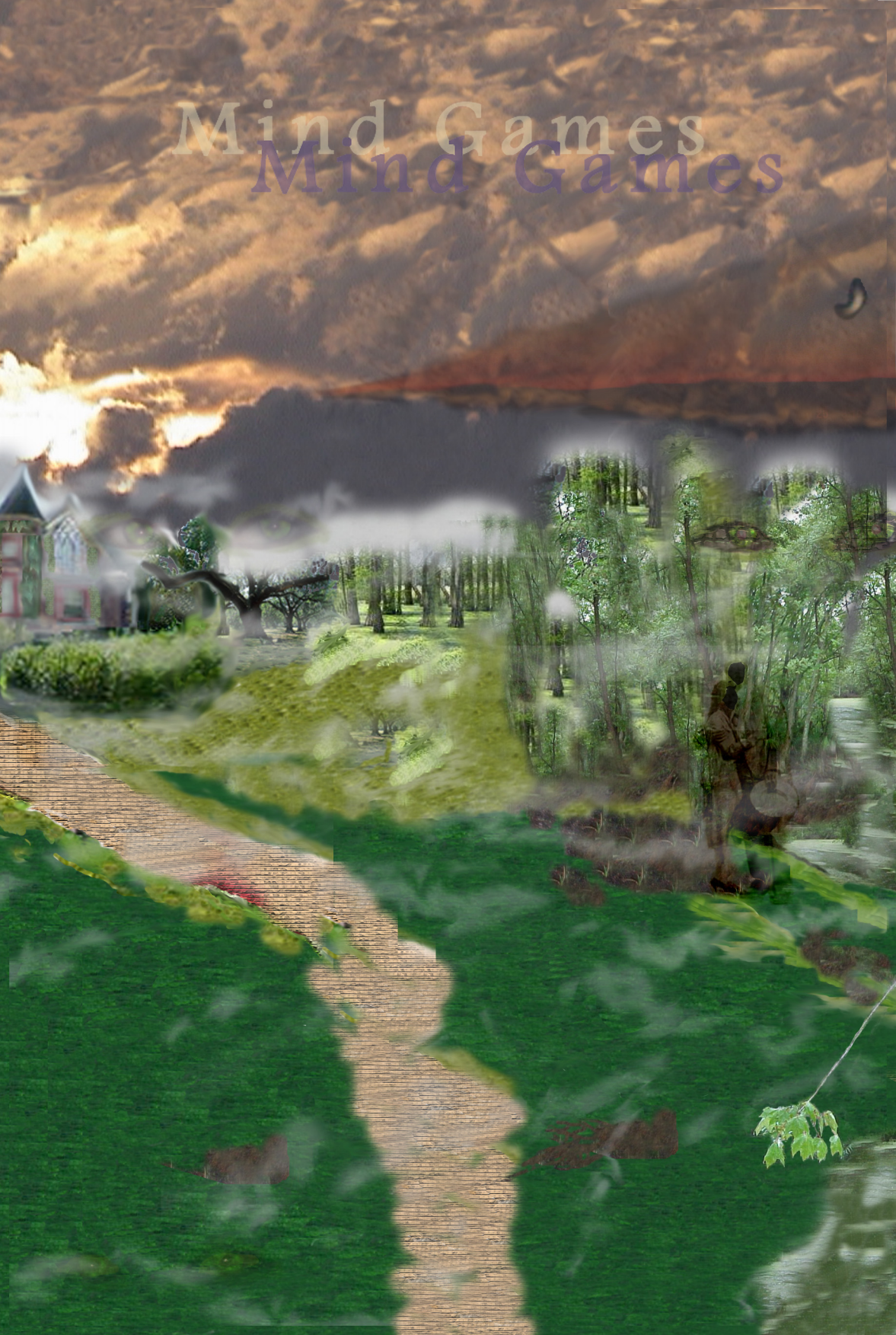
“Emm-twah. Now— Go . . . to . . . sleep!” Her eyes widened and her head tilted slightly as she gave the order, then she kissed him again.

Melissa sat on the edge of Tony’s bed humming a lullaby and gently stroking his locks, she smiling down upon the child. Although Tony would never confess, he loved the attention. Melissa knew it.

After she turned off his night lamp, she headed into Jennifer’s room through the adjoining doors.

Mind Games

Mind Games





Mind Games Mind Games

Mind Games is a story about a woman trapped like a withering fern that is potted in clay and tucked away in a dark corner. For years her mentally abusive husband has used her as part of his on-going research into metaphysical realities. Now, he is missing and a handsome lieutenant detective investigates the case. He himself is plagued with secrets from his past. After years of carefully hiding them, they threaten to surface. The officer wants to guard his secret, but he also wants to protect the woman. Most of his colleagues suspect foul play at the woman's hand. Only the lieutenant detective believes otherwise. Time is of the essence to prove his theory; manpower is needed on other cases. He must decide. Will he protect his secret at the expense of the investigation? The plot thickens as a baffling new clue leads investigators to a pool of blood.

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