

A decorative title box for 'PROLOGUE'. The box is rectangular with a dark, textured background and a metallic, riveted border. The word 'PROLOGUE' is written in a white, stylized, gothic-style font in the center.

# PROLOGUE

Four blocks over and twenty-one blocks down from the Whippet Hotel, there was a crumbling neighborhood of mostly empty buildings. Somewhere in that neighborhood, at the end of its darkest alley, a man stood before a grim door. He'd walked down six concrete steps to arrive at the door, where he stood, unsure of what he should do next. His elbow had caught the edge of a spiderweb on his way down, and he nervously brushed it away.

Twice already he had raised his hand to knock, only to pull it back and consider his options. He could return to his basement cubicle at the New York tax office, where the ceilings were lit with awful yellow buzzing lights and his cell phone wouldn't work. All day long he stared into a computer screen looking for mistakes on forms. It was a thankless, depressing job, for which he was paid only enough to afford a one-room

apartment in the very neighborhood where the grim door stood.

His name was Mr. Carp, and he hated his day job. It ran the risk of turning him bitter like the burnt coffee they served in the basement.

Any casual observer would see how Mr. Carp's whole awful existence appeared to well up inside him — his mangy cat, Claudius; his threadbare couch; a total lack of interesting hobbies; basic cable.

He was a man, it seemed, with nothing much to lose. And so, against his better judgment, he knocked on the forbidding door.

He instantly turned to leave, as if he knew it was a mistake. When his foot touched the last concrete stair and he was about to make his escape into the dismal gloom of the alley, the door opened.

“Mr. Carp, what a pleasant surprise.”

It was a sharp voice, filled with the kind of power that stopped sad, desperate men in their tracks. Carp looked back and tried to be polite.

“Ms. Sparks, I presume?”

“The one and only,” she answered, tapping the edge of the door with her long fingernails. She eyed the attaché case under Mr. Carp's arm and smiled wickedly. “Come in, then, come in. I've just put on the tea. We'll have a nice long chat, us two.”

Ms. Sparks leaned out the door as Mr. Carp came back and stood beneath the shadow of her large beehive hairdo.

“I have some business to discuss,” Mr. Carp said, anxiously straightening his wire-rimmed glasses as he stared up into Ms. Sparks’s narrow eyes. He had a thick, tangled-looking mustache, which he ran his hand over nervously.

Although Ms. Sparks did not seem impressed, that was all part of her act. She knew this was a visitor of some importance, for Mr. Carp had the power to turn the fate of the Whippet Hotel in a different direction.

The grim door shut and a secret conversation was had.