

MURDER AT THE GALA



Joshiah Warbaum

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Joshiah's Written Works

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Dedications

This work of fiction is dedicated to all of the wonderful fans and friends who have helped me to reach this point over the last eight months. Going professional as an author has been a struggle, but one that has brought me a joy beyond description.

I have more of you to thank and more good things to say about all of you than I can fit in a book, so I hope these thanks, and dedicating this experiment to you will suffice.

Truly, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, all of you.

Preface

The longer I stay in the writing game, the more I realize just how rapidly time tends to pass by.

I barely had the time to register that I'd gotten into the dealers room at Fur Squared before I set about writing a book that fit the theme of the 2016 iteration, and I've always had a soft spot for "Choose your own adventure" books. I loved them as a child, and thought it would be interesting to recount the story of a murder mystery, taking place at an event that doesn't quite act as a foil for the convention itself, but if you happen to feel like it's occurring all around you, then perhaps, I've done my job.

This book, "Murder At The Gala," is my first attempt at doing something other than fantasy, adventure, science fiction, or adult themed stories. It was a challenge in itself for just that reason, and having such a limited window to write it in meant having to really buckle down (and keep a couple of very patient commissioners waiting,) only made things that much harder. This created a unique situation in that I'm proud of this book, as I am of all of my works, and yet, I wish I had just a little more time to spin a greater adventure out of what I'd started.

There's always room for a sequel, of course.

In this particular story, you take on the role of a nameless, and mostly silent protagonist. You're a guest of honor at an exciting, annual event, and you have a very important speech to give at the end of the night, though you may never even learn what the speech was supposed to be about, depending upon the paths you take.

Danger is all around you, and yet, nowhere to be found in the Hotel Chalet, and people are interested in you as the guest of honor, for reasons far beyond your speech. You'll get to meet a cast of exciting and interesting characters, each with their own intricate and connected history. Though you don't yet know it, you'll be at the center of a very important decision, and the things that you notice throughout the night will be crucial to making the right choice.

Of course...we can't go spoiling **all** of the details now, can we? There's a whole book ahead of you for that, and I greatly appreciate you taking the time to thumb through the pages and enjoy a satisfying adventure.

Welcome to the Hotel Chalet. We hope you *survive* your stay.

The stars are out in force, the air is crisp and cool with the dawn of an early spring, and everyone is excited to attend the 5th Annual Brookfield Gala.

Like every year previous, the event is being hosted at the Hotel Chalet, and the stroke of the breeze that greets the soft fur upon your cheek is almost bitterly cold as you exit your car, after handing your keys to the valet. You're a distinguished guest this year, the very first time you've ever been able to boast such an honor, and you look the part as well; black slacks, a dress shirt, recently ironed and steam cleaned, and a sport coat that flatters your shoulders to give you a proud, firm stance.

Your footpaws are decorated with a pair of freshly shined dress shoes, and you're thankful for the same as you make your way up a flight of stairs, to the front door of the ornately decorated Hotel Chalet. Pellets of salt dot the ground to melt away the last of the ice, and they crunch satisfyingly under your shoes, instead of sticking to your fur, as they otherwise would have.

Your satisfaction is interrupted as you find yourself entirely *awestruck*. Standing ten stories tall and boasting an atrium in the main hall that is the largest in the state, the Hotel Chalet casts an imposing shadow to the likes of those who weren't familiar with life in a big city. Your jaw hangs agape, and your ears actually wilt back just slightly as your nervous system finally takes hold again, forcing your paw to reach for the door handle to let yourself in.

As you start to swing the door open, you can faintly hear the sound of a woman yelling out for you to hold the door. Your mind is caught between the amazement of what waits just inside the door, and the sound that beckons you back to the outside of the building.

To wait for the lady and hold the door for her, turn to page 10.

To ignore her and focus on the stunning atrium and front entry, turn to page 162.

Ever the polite individual and wanting to make a good first impression as an honored guest, you come to your senses enough to stop and turn back, keeping the handle of the door in your paw. You even take a slight step to the side as the yellow irises of your eyes turn with a kindly gaze upon a white Turkish Angora, clearly dolled up for the occasion.

“Oh, thank you *ever* so much! It’s nice to see that chivalry hasn’t gone completely extinct,” she thanks you as she hastens her pace for the door, not wanting to make you hold it forever. “My name is Elisa, and I’m supposed to be overseeing the proceeding of events this evening...what night, other than tonight would my car decide to have a flat tire?”

You agree with her that her luck is terrible, and try to make a witty pun to distract her from the problem.

“I only wish that my car was as timely as your sense of humor,” Elisa replies. “My evening has only brightened since the moment I met you...I do certainly hope to run into you again...?”

The questioning tone in her voice makes it clear she wants your identity, so you promptly introduce yourself and offer a friendly smile. Seeing that you’re still holding the door, Elisa giggles, bringing a paw to her face to maintain an appearance that is so dainty, it borders on being inauthentic.

“*Hehe*...don’t go wearing yourself out already! We’ve got a **very** long night ahead of us.”

The innuendo of her statement isn’t lost on you, and you can feel the flesh under your fur taking on a color much more akin to the bright red of her dress, hanging scarcely above her thighs and acting as a brilliant contrast to her soft, off-white fur. Her image is burned into your mind as she finally walks away with a casual wave, despite her strong statement. With a subtle flick of the wrist, she brushes her neck-length blonde headfur from her gaze and heads to the right.

Free of your burden, you allow the door to close quietly behind you and enter the atrium. A massive, grand staircase sits on the back wall in the center of the room, and spreads into a wide landing at the exact middle of the floor. To the left and right are large, open gaps in the walls, giving the atrium a proper, open-concept feeling, so that very few areas would ever be out of sight. As the sound of soft, classical music, played by the talented paws of a live band crosses over your ears, you feel your heart settling down, and your body doing the same as Elisa disappears into a growing crowd to your right. To your left, you can see a large

table in the middle of another room, easily large enough to seat twenty guests, if not more.

To follow Elisa and head toward the crowd, turn to page 28.

To go to the left and try to find your seat at the table, turn to page 14.

The party looks enticing, but you're not sure that you're quite in a party mood just yet. Instead, you decide that you should be a proper guest of honor and make your way to the table early, wanting to find your seat before everyone else does, thinking it a smart, albeit slightly vain way to appear professional.

Elisa starts to fade from your mind as you turn away from the rambunctious guests and walk to the left. Your shoes make a pleasant **click-clack** as you walk across the opulent floors, patterned with black marbling over white stone. The way that the bannister of the grand staircase in the center of the room contrasts the floor with a rich, deep burgundy is pleasing on the eyes, and yet again, you find yourself wondering if you're really qualified to be at such a formal event. Not wanting to appear nervous, you walk a bit more briskly to the large dining room...

...Only to find it empty when you arrive. There are actually 22 seats at the table, including the two seats on each vertical end, but your initial guess was rather close, and you find yourself feeling prideful at just how close you were. The walls are flooded with shades of calming, deep maroon, and massive picture windows allow the moon to flood the room, even if the chandeliers hanging above were to fail. It's a setting fit for a king, and as you approach the table to look over the name cards placed on each dish to find yours, you begin to worry all over again, just at the unwieldy amount of silverware available. If you actually had to use all of those pieces in a certain order, you'd never be able to get it right, short of another lucky guess.

A quick walk around the long, rectangular table reveals that you're sitting just two seats down from one of the vertical ends, and to be that close to the head of the table, you feel that you must be pretty special. It puts a fresh confidence in your step, and suddenly, you feel like it couldn't hurt to follow Elisa through the party, although there was plenty of hotel to explore. After all, you haven't even checked in!

To make your way over to the party after all, turn to page 28.

To stop at the front desk and check in instead, turn to page 18.

The party isn't going anywhere, and you decide that it would be best to grab your room key and check in before you mingle, just in case you happen to overserve yourself. Your lack of self-control around an open bar is rather...*legendary*, for lack of a better term.

You exit the dining room with a slow swish in your tail, one that you can't control, now that you're fully settled into the moment. Your charisma is so great that by the time you reach the front desk, situated on the wall just to the left of the grand staircase, the manager can't help but notice, and be infected by it.

"Another eager guest, staying for the Brookfield Gala, I presume? It would seem you've already gotten into the 'spirit' just a little bit!"

You explain that you're not drunk (yet,) but instead, you're just excited to be the guest of honor at such a prestigious event. The manager acknowledges this and hands over the key as you confirm your identity.

"How very foolish of me not to recognize you! You have my **deepest** apologies. Here's your key, and of course, you'll be staying in the Presidential Suite. It's on the tenth floor, and I'm sure that you'll find your every need has been accommodated. If you need anything else, of course, don't hesitate to call!"

With a bright grin, you take the key in a paw and stuff it into your pocket. Your tail swishes that much faster as you mull over what kind of world you've finally arrived at: a top floor suite, free drinks, and a seat at the table of honor? It certainly couldn't get much better than this!

Your mind slowly wanders back to Elisa, and you're brimming with confidence, now. She could just be another friendly face, but she wasn't the only one in the crowd, and if there was ever a time to mingle, this would be it.

To go to the party and show them what you're made of, turn to page 28.

To go up and take a look at your amazing room first, turn to page 21.

Deciding to push your luck that much further about the party ending and dinner starting, you eagerly rush up the grand staircase in the middle of the atrium and over to the clearly marked elevators. They're over to the right side of the room, and despite the rest of the hotel looking rather old fashioned, this area looks entirely modern: the elevator lobby is entirely up to date, and when your car arrives, you're relieved to find that everything is up to specification, despite the nearly ancient age of the building.

The ride up to the top is smooth, and a pleasant, electric **woooooom** is drowned out by the sound of typical, cheesy elevator music. Bright as your mood is, however, you find yourself actually **enjoying** the forgettable tune, and even whistling it as you reach the tenth floor.

There are very few doors here, and all of the suites appear to be on this floor. Your room number is 1012, and the placard on the wall indicates that you're all the way to the right. Soft, cushy carpet meets with your shoes as they briskly carry your body down to the end of the hallway, moving with a vigor that simply wasn't present when you arrived. Tense nerves had been replaced with a nearly aggressive enjoyment of the evening, and as you turn the key to your room, it only gets that much better.

You enter into a simply **massive** area. The floor spreads out wide in front of you, and to your immediate right is a small kitchenette, plenty more than any common traveler would ever need. A long, sectional couch is in the center of the room and surrounds a TV screen in a set up that proves the room was meant for entertaining large parties, and yet, you have it all to yourself.

There's a door on the right wall, but you figure it must be for the bedroom, and you aren't ready to go to bed just yet. You didn't bring any extra belongings for the evening, and everything that you might need appears to have been provided for you...including a tasty nightcap on the mini-bar that rests in the kitchenette. Like most hotel wet bars, this one appears to have a special scale that measures the bottles upon it by weight, to see if anything has been consumed, giving the hotel a measure to charge you by.

Guest of honor means that I should be entitled to a free drink, right? The thought crosses your mind as you prepare to finally head down to the party, and by now, you're sure things are winding down, but it couldn't hurt to try a cautionary sip first. After all, there are bottles here that you've never even **heard** of!

To take a sample from the unknown alcohol, turn to page 25.

To go down to the party like you should have almost an hour ago, turn to page 165.

Clearly, the sauce has a hold on you every bit as tight as the grip of your paws around the neck of the bottle. You can't find any shot-glasses to pour into, but there are a couple of small, clean glasses in the cabinets above. Sure that no one would judge you for having a tall, stiff drink, you lift the bottle, pop the cork from the top, and pour a healthy serving into the glass. It's a clear fluid, and it doesn't have the strong, powerful odor of vodka or any other spirits. There's just enough of a burn to the nose for you to be sure that it's even alcohol, and happily, you take a sip.

And then another.

And yet **another**.

Welp. That wasn't the best idea, as you slowly set the bottle down on the scale once again. The drink is as addicting as it is powerful, or so it would seem, as you start to wobble back and forth on your paws. Legs that were once filled with an inhuman vigor suddenly turn to jelly as you lean over the kitchen counter, your clumsy paws knocking the open bottle down to the tile floor with a loud, alarming **CRASH!**

Glass flies and liquid spills everywhere as you fall down into the mess of it all, garnering minor cuts from the glass shards along the way, but they're of no real concern anymore...your balance is lost, your paws refuse to lift you, and your mind is so heavily nauseated, it's a wonder that you're still conscious.

Whatever was in the bottle, it's done you in, and by the time help finally comes to reach you, it'll be too late to save you. It'll already be...

THE END

The dining room looks lovely, but you'll likely be sitting at it for a couple hours this evening, perhaps even **longer**. You don't really relish in that idea, and Elisa looks like she's having a ball over at the party, so...what's the point in waiting? You happily swish your tail back and forth, like a metronome to the soothing sound of a horsehair bow across thin, steel strings, and eager paws carry you into the thick of the party.

A wide variety of different characters are out in force at the party, and all of them are faces that you not only recognize, but feel a renewed sense of awe just to be around. Clearly standing out from the group are Charles Swift, a previous guest of honor at the event and a wolf with fur every bit as black as the pits of the ocean, Helen Flannery, a highland puma with thick, full tresses of red hair, burning as brightly as her last name might suggest, and Tom Thatcher, the young, enigmatic son of the owner of the Hotel Chalet, one Mr. Edward Thatcher.

You wish that you would have thought to go and get a drink before engaging with such a crowd, but as you make your way through, schmoozing up every possible guest that you can, you find that you have a natural knack for talking to people who hail from the upper crust. What seemed like an occasion that would be larger than life for most, you're now taking to like a fish to water, and no one even seems to notice that you're the new face in the crowd. To them, you're just another upper class citizen, and you feel both refreshed that you're fitting in so well, and yet, *slightly* let down that the luster of your 'guest of honor' status is already fading.

Though she was very kind to you before, Elisa already seems to have forgotten you, and when you make eye contact again in the room, she doesn't as much as offer even a casual wave. Perhaps you didn't leave such a powerful impression upon her, after all!

"If your tail drags any lower, you're likely to trip right o'er it!"

A voice that has a rather distinct Scottish trill rings across your ears, and just at the mention of your tail, it picks right up. The voice is that of Helen Flannery, justifying her reputation as a social butterfly by approaching you, even though the two of you have never met.

You awkwardly introduce yourself, unable to help being rather star-struck at meeting such a high profile celebrity, and yet, your introduction does little more than make Helen giggle.

“Such a kind-hearted soul ya are, my friend. It’s good to have such company in our midst at the Gala! Maybe **this** year won’t be such a snooze fest after all!”

You’re surprised to hear such an opinion, as everything you were told leading up to the event would lead you to believe that the Gala wasn’t just a high profile event, but in fact, a rather *rowdy* occasion. Curious to know more, you ask Helen just why she felt the event was so boring.

“Some silly guest of honor sits at the head of a table and gives a wee little speech, and then the owner of the hotel thanks his guests for coming, and we have a boring little dinner, and everyone retires to their bedrooms so bloomin’ early that ya have to wonder *why* they came in the first place! If you’re willin’ to pay the kind of rates that the Hotel Chalet charges, you should live a little before you go off to dreamland!”

Helen speaks with an authority and passion in her words that lead you to believe that you could **never** keep up with the pace of her lifestyle, but she’s authentic; you don’t doubt for a moment that she’s the legendary party girl that she’s come to be known as. Her presence here is no surprise, but the fact that she’s talking to you does seem just a little bit unusual.

“Do ya agree with me, stranger?”

Her question snaps you back to reality for a moment. You politely nod and agree that life is best lived to the fullest.

“Then perhaps I could trouble ya for a bed to sleep in this evening? I’m afraid I didn’t make a reservation at the Hotel Chalet in time, and though I was invited, the managers *claim* that they don’t have a room available for me. Could ya help out a poor puma this fine evening?”

To tell Helen that she can stay in your room for the evening, turn to page 35.

To tell Helen that you’re not interested, turn to page 167.

After a long moment of introspection, you fall victim to the bright, emerald eyes of a lovely puma, and confirm that you're willing to let her stay the night in your room, if she truly needs a place to sleep.

"That's **wonderful!** I don't care what they say about you American gents back across the pond; I think you're sweeter than sugar cane!"

Helen throws her arms around you in the middle of the party, stirring up a few whispers and snickers from the crowd. You suddenly wonder if you've gotten a lot more than you bargained for, and yet, you don't want to leave her looking like a desperate fool, so you rest your arms around her lower back and return the embrace. Rumors are swirling even before the two of you separate, and Helen slowly backs away and turns from you with a quick wink, and a last whisper: "I hope you turn out to be every bit the gentleman that you seem to be..."

You can feel a warmth rushing into your cheeks with such ferocity that you actually fan yourself with your paw for a moment once Helen is finally looking away.

"Don't let her into you for too much, fella. She's trouble and chaos incarnate, that one."

You try to shrug off the mean, venomous comment as you turn around to the source of the noise. Your latest in a string of high profile visitors is Tom Thatcher, a stately young border collie with ears and headfur of asphalt, and eyes like yellow traffic lights.

"Helen Flannery likes to party, **everybody** knows that, but they don't all know that she has a reputation for not paying up when the rent is due, so to speak. She's been invited to this event every year, and every year, she's managed to weasel her way out of paying for a room, no doubt at the expense of my short-sighted father...I was going to see to it that she was escorted off of the premises when the event concluded tonight, but it would seem that **you** have gone out of your way to make things even more difficult for me. Might I have your name, stranger?"

You tell Tom Thatcher your name and explain that you're the guest of honor this year. Truth be told, he doesn't look that impressed by your title for the evening, and even goes so far as to roll his eyes a little bit at your explanation.

"So you're the one who gets to sit near the end of the table and lie to my father about how poor his dental hygiene is! I actually feel a *little* sorry for you, but..."

I'd be remiss if I carried this petty nature any further. I apologize for coming across so short with you, but the Brookfield Gala is always a stressful occasion, and it feels like the night never ends when you're one of the people working it."

You find the nature of Tom Thatcher slightly confusing and even a little *alarming*, but you try to shrug it off. You explain that you know plenty about dealing with a stressful evening and a packed house, and the two of you discuss moments from your past when you were overwhelmed at a social event. Before too long, Tom Thatcher seems like a normal person, and the two of you are standing at a small, improvised bar in the party, sharing a glass of bourbon (on the house, naturally.)

"Seems that we actually have a guest of honor worth bringing around, this year! It's a refreshing change."

You explain to Tom that Helen said almost exactly the same thing, and once again, he rolls his eyes, this time with a groan.

"Well, I'd butter you up, too, if you were the last person in the room I could ask for a place to sleep...I'm sure your company is good and worth keeping, but don't look too far into her words, and don't forget to lock the door to your personal quarters when you force her to the couch."

You were actually thinking about being a good host and letting Helen have the bed, but such things are trivial to worry about, at the moment. You're becoming more concerned with your speech as the party slowly winds down, and more and more guests make their way to the dining room for the main event, or start to retire to their rooms if they weren't given an invitation to dinner. When you see the number of guests that are still left at the party and compare it to the number of seats around the dining table, you realize that most of the guests were only invited for drinks and socializing...the actual speech you are to give feels that much more **exclusive**, and nerves start to creep into your paws again, until they're shaking with such a force that expensive bourbon is dripping over your pawtips and spilling to the ground.

Tom Thatcher takes quick notice of this and pats you on the shoulder.

"Relax, you're a natural when it comes to talking to strangers. Just stay focused on delivering a clean, simple speech, and it'll be over before you know it. Don't let Helen weasel her way into your head and screw you up...I'm sure she'll be eyeballing you the whole time."

You thank Tom for the advice, and he bids you adieu for the moment. You order another glass of bourbon now that you know it's on the house as part of your

‘guest of honor’ privileges, hoping that the second glass will be enough to calm your nerves. You don’t want to give off the feeling that you’re a lush to the rest of the crowd, but the second drink couldn’t hurt, and if nothing else, it gives you a little something extra to fiddle with at the dining table, which is now almost fully populated.

It might not be a bad idea to start heading that way, but then again, no one has told you that you **have** to just yet.

To take your seat at the table and prepare for your speech, turn to page 43.

To sneak up to your room first to kill some more time, turn to page 176.

You *could* go to your room, but knowing your luck, you'd run into a line for the elevator, end up having to use the bathroom, and before you knew it, you'd be late for your speech to start. You don't want to risk that, so you decide to take your seat at the massive dining table and mentally prepare for the speech, sure that it's going to be one of the defining moments of your life.

Silly little fears plague your mind as you walk across the open atrium and into the stately dining room. You're sweating **profusely**, and you're sure that people can see it through the pits of your suit coat. You're doing your best not to breathe heavily, but you can tell that your body is trying to pant, even just a little bit, and it's distracting some of the other partygoers.

You're seconds from being a wreck until you press your glass to your lips again and take a long, soothing sip from your bourbon. Like a muse in glass, the alcohol calms your nerves, at least enough for you to look presentable as you take your seat, but some of the guests of the evening are giving you very strange looks at this point, as if your nervous nature is something out of the ordinary for a guest of honor. You do your best not to care, but you can't help noticing that a pair of guests at the end of the table, an orange tabby cat with a fedora and a doe in a short, slinky black dress, refuse to take their eyes off of you, and they're whispering back and forth about something.

You know that you're the topic of discussion, but you do your best not to care. A couple of people that you've never met and likely won't remember a year down the road weren't worth worrying about on the best evening of your life, and by the time you take your seat, you've nearly forgotten about them.

Your only concern is how to keep from falling asleep in one of the most comfortable chairs you've ever sat in. The backrest is, in a word, *perfect*. It keeps your spine aligned in such a way that you can't help relaxing even further, and your footpaws plant firmly against the ground, just enough that you aren't slouching, but your back won't grow tired, either. It's like the chair was made for you, and just like that, you're back on top of your confidence and truly feeling like you belong in that seat.

Even as the owner of the hotel makes his way into the room and takes his seat at the head of the table, you aren't fazed, and his kindly, aged smile greets you in the same way that a grandfather would greet his grandson on a random visit to the family. With one glance and one curve of his lips, he gives you the impression that he's known you your whole life, and, despite the clear physical

resemblance to his son, you begin to wonder how a man with such kind eyes could have spawned such a vengeful person as Tom.

“You’re our guest of honor this year, is that right?”

His voice is worn and tired, reminding you of the casual squeak of a rocking chair that was long past its prime. You assure him that you are the guest of honor, and that you’re looking forward to giving your speech at the Brookfield Gala.

“Yes, yes...I’m sure you’re **very** excited. I remember nearly having a heart attack when my quaint, little hotel secured this event in the inaugural year! Great times, indeed, my lad. It’s an honor to meet you. I’m sure you’re gonna knock ‘em dead with your speech.”

You thank the kind old hotel owner for his vote of confidence. You aren’t sure just how much you believe it yourself, but you’re doing your best to build on the confidence you already feel, aided by the kind words of friendly strangers.

“I saw you speaking with my son earlier. Tell me...how was he behaving this evening? Was he a kind host to you?”

You quickly explain that he was, going so far as to fluff the story just a little bit. This man is giving you free room and board in his exquisite hotel, and you’re not about to insult his flesh and blood to his face. You do, however, explain that he seemed rather agitated.

“Yes, I’m afraid young Tommy puts **far** too much pressure on himself to ensure that these events go smoothly. It’ll put him into an early grave if he isn’t careful,” Edward Thatcher says, showing a concern for his son that would make any young man jealous of such a caring father figure. “And I’m sure that having Helen Flannery here isn’t doing his heart any favors, either.

Now, you’re *truly* curious, but you aren’t sure just how safe it is to keep prying into Tom’s personal life. His father even seems reluctant to discuss it further, but clearly, there’s something more to the spat between Tom and Helen than a couple of unpaid hotel rooms.

To ask Edward Thatcher what the history is between Tom and Helen, turn to page 182.

To move on with the conversation and try to change the subject, turn to page 50.

Satisfied with the information that you've been given about the situation and leaving sleeping dogs to lie, you opt to move along with the conversation, but your words are cut short before you can even speak them.

"Thank you all so much for coming to the Fifth Annual Brookfield Gala!"

A loud, domineering voice cries out from the middle of the table, and both you and Edward Thatcher turn to look to the source. A tall, lanky and rather casually dressed jackal (at least, for this occasion,) stands up and taps his knife against his glass with a sharp *clink*, drawing an end to the myriad of random conversations around the horn.

"It is with great pleasure that I welcome you, our most *distinguished* guests, to the dinner portion of the evening. Only our most elite company is welcome, of course, and you'll be treated to food that is nothing short of decadent. When the meal concludes, we'll be hearing a short speech from our guest of honor for the evening!"

The jackal announces you by name, and you feel a wave of renewed bashfulness, but stand up slowly and wave to the other dinner guests, nonetheless. Your smile is a mixture of authentic joy and pride for being the special guest of such an occasion, and a nervous energy that you can't quite shake, despite having some experience speaking in front of a crowd.

"I'm sure we're all strongly looking forward to that, but before our guest of honor can speak, we need to fill up his voice box, don't you think?" the jackal asks, his joke falling a little flat and only drawing a few awkward, forced chuckles from the crowd. Still, like the professional he is, he rolls right along and announces the meal: an eight ounce serving of filet mignon, scalloped garlic potatoes, slow roasted stalks of asparagus, and a dessert course to be enjoyed *after* your speech concludes.

"As for me, my name is Jim Karns, and I'm honored to be your host for the evening. If you have any questions about the meal or the event as the evening goes by, please, don't hesitate to ask."

As one might expect, everyone applauds Jim after his short speech, and you join right in, slapping your paws together mostly for appearances; you weren't all that impressed by his joke. However, the break in speaking allows you a second chance to ask Edward Thatcher about the drama between his son and Helen, if you like. Alternatively, you think it might be better to go so far as to walk over to Jim Karns, and ask him if he knows anything about the situation.

The clock is ticking on your decision, and already, you can see a trained staff of waiters and waitresses, dressed up in uncomfortably tight black vests and white dress shirts, starting to populate the area. You'd better make up your mind quickly, if you want to find out anything about the history between those two.

To get up and ask Jim Karns instead, turn to page 185.

To do nothing until your delicious food arrives, turn to page 55.

You *could* get up and ask Jim about Tom and Helen. You *could* stay put and ask Edward, as well.

Instead, you opt to stay put and do a whole lot of nothing, because alcohol doesn't sit well on an empty stomach, and after all of the bourbon you consumed at the dance, you decide that it might be best to just wait for your food, so you don't end up making an ass of yourself during your speech.

In the moments between, you try to minimize awkward silences by chatting up Edward, and you find that he really does feel like a grandfather to you; it's as if you've known the man your entire life, and no matter what topic you bring up to him, he has something to add, but not in any way that feels obnoxious. He isn't one-upping you: he's merely adding to the conversation as you go, and you decide that age really can make a person worldlier.

Worried about talking too frequently for the hotel owner, you cut the small talk short before it becomes dry, and your timing is impeccable. All of the appetizers and bread have been consumed, and as if on cue, the waiters and waitresses return with a fleet of large dinner platters, coated with filet mignon that is cooked to a tender and juicy medium rare, potatoes that are so fluffy that they could melt upon your spoon, and asparagus that has been given just enough of a smoky char to make it properly enjoyable.

Hastily, you take a surveying bite of everything on the plate. The steak is every bit as tender as it looks, nearly melting away as it hits your tongue. You taste hints of butter, garlic, oregano and other herbs as you swallow the steak, and before you know it, your tail is up and wagging with delight. You almost forget that there are potatoes and asparagus on the plate, but only just long enough for you to catch the aroma of a melting pad of butter and oozing sour cream spilling over the edges of the spuds.

One bite, and you're in heaven all over again. You try not to salivate too heavily, worried about making a spectacle of yourself, but you've simply never tasted anything this **delicious** before! If you'd known that events like this were so exquisitely catered, you likely would have tried sneaking into them years ago.

Asparagus isn't exactly your favorite, but you do give it a try, and you find that the process of grilling it to infuse it with a smoky flavor is the perfect way to make it more palatable for the average consumer. The faintest hints of citrus make their way down your throat as you appreciate the finer flavors of the marinade used, and like magic, the food has made you forget all about that

nerve-wracking speech you have to give...

...That is, until you end up cleaning your plate, and realize that there isn't much time until you have to give it.

Still, dinner was amazing, and you do your best to focus on the quality of the meal, going so far as to think of it as a model for you to base your actions off of. It's a hard act to follow, but if you can deliver as quality of a performance as that meal was, you're sure that everyone will be enthralled with you, and hang on your every word for the rest of the evening. Being that much of the center of attention is *almost* overwhelming to you, but you focus more on the pride of such a thing, instead of the nerves of it, and suddenly, you actually **want** it to happen.

The waiters and waitresses make one last sweep, and clear the dishes.

You notice all of the sets of eyes in the room are coming to settle on you, and clear your throat.

With just one last concern, you wipe your sleeve against your forehead to disperse of any errant sweat, and clear your mind.

Its lights, camera, action...

...Just in time for all of the lights to go out.

The entire hotel is blanketed in darkness, and you hear a distant scream. You can't tell just how far it is, but if you had to wager, you'd think that it came all the way from the banquet hall. Your blood turns to ice and freezes you stiff as one scream leads to many in the cruel darkness. Chairs scoot away from the table, bodies shuffle, and you're left wondering just what you should do.

To get up and join those going to investigate the sound, turn to page 187.

To stay put and wait for the lights to come back on, turn to page 62.

The confidence that you built up right before the scream tells you to be a brave soldier and head for the sound of the noise, but common sense tells you that you'd be running blindly into an unknown danger, so your paws stay planted firmly on the floor, and your backside refuses to rise from the chair.

Your ears perk, and just by sound alone, you can tell that several people have already gone to the source of the noise anyway. You're extremely curious what they might find, but not curious enough to go look. Part of you says that everyone in the room is merely suffering from hysteria because of a power outage, but as the lights turn back on without so much as a flicker, you realize that this was a planned outage...not the wrath of Mother Nature.

"Is everyone alright?" Jim Karns is the first one to speak, and though four people are missing from the room, everyone else is quick to nod. Some are breathing heavily and looking positively pale as the atmosphere of panic sets in, but no one in the room is dead, or even wounded. Merely out of paranoia, you give your own body a quick scan, but don't find so much as a scratch, and instantly, your eyes scan the table. You can see that the couple who were eyeing you earlier have disappeared together, and though it didn't occur to you before, Helen is nowhere to be found. You think back to dinner and begin to wonder if she ever even made it to the table, and though Tom Thatcher is present as well...you get the impression that the highland puma may have already had her last meal.

"Let's all **try** to calm down," Jim continues to speak, though his words are in vain. The panic is so thick that it can be cut with a knife, and even as the squeals of terror subside, it's clear that a few of the other dinner guests are suffering from anxiety attacks, and with good reason. As far as anyone can tell, there was just a murder committed, or at least *attempted*, and anyone that was missing from the room was surely directly involved.

Perhaps scarier still, there could be people still in the room that were involved with it.

The thoughts of your speech have completely left your mind at this point, and knowing that it would only add to the problem if you allowed panic to get a hold of your mind, you do your best to stay calm. Your paws grip the sides of your chair, and your claws dig deep rivets into the finely crafted wood as you do your best to steady yourself, but when the couple that had disappeared finally return to the room, the news that they come bearing does **nothing** to put your mind at ease.

“Sorry to trouble you, sir, but you’re going to have to come with us for a moment.”

It’s the orange tabby cat that you noticed earlier, thanks to his distinctive fedora. He’s looking at you with all of the contempt that his eyes held for you before, and the doe is standing next to him. Trying to stay as calm as possible, you turn back and raise an eyebrow, asking who he is to make such a demand in a dangerous situation.

“I’m Detective Murphy, and this is Detective Walters,” he introduces himself and the doe. Detective Murphy pulls a badge from his pocket to make his statement official; Detective Walters is already holding hers, and given that all you’ve seen her in that evening is the slinky dress, you try not to let your mind wander to where she’d been keeping it. “I’m afraid you’re a suspect in our investigation in the murder of Helen Flannery...shame that we were too late to stop it.”

The way that the detectives were looking at you at the start of dinner is all starting to make sense, and it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that there was a setup, planned the whole time, with **you** as the lead red herring. The only chance you have to clear your good name is to cooperate with the police, but at the announcement alone that you’re being investigated, all eyes in the room turn on you, filled with absolute disgust and fear.

What can you do now...?

To cooperate with the police and aid in their investigation, turn to page 73.

To make a run for it, turn to page 68.

These police don't know you, these people don't know you, and as far as you can remember, **everyone** saw you talking to Helen Flannery at the party. It's no wonder that you're a suspect, and no matter what you say, you realize that it's not going to do you any good. They've likely already pegged you as guilty and just want to lead you to interrogation.

Fearful of your life and your future, you slide your chair back, stand up as if you're going to go with them...and throw the chair in their path, blocking their way to you as your footpaws carry you to the door as quickly as possible.

...Wow. Seriously? You thought that would work?

Lady Luck is on your side, at least as far as getting out of the moment alive. Detective Murphy draws his weapon and trains his sights on the back of your head, but his better judgment tells him that you'll need to be taken alive for questioning. A deafening **BLAM** fills the dining room with the sound of gunfire, and your shoulder is riddled with a sensation of terrible pain before your ears can flicker to the soundwave.

You're hit, and, never having been shot before, your body can't cope with the pain. You grip your shoulder, but your legs immediately stumble. Adrenaline and shock draw their pistols at each other in your body, and shock wins the duel, sending you crashing to the ground, gasping and clutching your flesh in a vain attempt to keep the blood inside of your body.

Detective Walters pushes you the rest of the way to the ground and pins you down, yanking your paws behind your back and cuffing you as quickly as she can. Your Miranda Rights are read to you as she proceeds, and Detective Murphy shakes his head at you as he approaches, wondering why you didn't just agree to help with the investigation that night.

Some days later, you're released from holding as you are cleared of the murder charges, but the mystery of who killed Helen Flannery, and why, remain the great question of the night.

Perhaps if you'd agreed to help the detectives, it's one you could have answered, but for the moment, you only know a few things about your life, and your situation. You'll certainly never be welcome back at the Hotel Chalet, and every possible bridge that you could have burned has been downright incinerated in the process. Your business contacts are shot, your reputation is that of an accomplice to murder, and somewhere out there, a murderer remains at large, having used you as the perfect cover to escape unscathed that evening.

As you sit in your apartment and swill a glass of cheap liquor, you can only relish in the fact that, despite all of your suffering, this is...

THE END

What kind of a fool would run from the police when they're just asking for help? They haven't implicated you for murder yet...they've merely announced you as a suspect. It was standard protocol, and though you're slightly insulted, you understand that these two are just doing their jobs. If you can be of any assistance to them, it would be for the best.

You agree to join them, and though every set of eyes in the room is still looking upon you with horror, you're more than happy to leave with the detectives, so long as it helps to clear your good name.

"Good choice, kid," Detective Murphy says, as he and Detective Walters escort you out, walking on either side of you. "You don't seem like the type to do such a thing, and it appears you were in this room the whole time, but we need to eliminate the possibility of you being an accomplice..."

You nod in understanding, but you're quick to ask why you would have been associated in the first place.

"It could just be bad timing on your part, but you were the last person to speak to Helen Flannery this evening," Detective Walters joins in the discussion. "Shortly after you did, Tom Thatcher approached you, and you two spoke at length...do you mind telling us about the content of your conversation?"

Immediately, you comply and tell the detectives that Helen was simply asking for a place to stay for the night. When they ask if you offered her a room, you admit that you did, and just as quickly as you speak, Detective Murphy is writing down your every word. Despite that you've been telling the truth the whole time, you're **extra** careful to watch what you say from there on out.

"And what about Tom?" Detective Murphy asks. "What did you tell him?"

You explain that the conversation was very one-sided, with Tom warning you about getting to be too friendly with Helen. You chuckle for a moment and make a joke that you think Tom was just bitter about someone flirting with an old flame, but the detectives don't offer even the *slightest* bit of a giggle.

"That's **exactly** what we're concerned about, and your conversation cements our theory. It was no secret that Tom Thatcher and Helen Flannery had some history together, but we didn't think the kid would risk the family business over a grudge with some girl who didn't want to turn a one night stand into permanent relationship."

Detective Murphy does have a pretty strong theory, but it's much too early in the

evening to be making an arrest, unless someone were to confess to the murder. You have no intention to, but as you walk at a snail's pace across the atrium, you begin to wonder if you're being brought to the body, and though you don't want to look, instinct tells you you're about to see a dead body.

Luck has other plans, and the detectives halt you short of the crime scene. They've already got the banquet hall barricaded off with a couple of tables and chairs, but that doesn't stop you from seeing a small stream of blood, running out along the corner of the large opening to the room like a crimson creek.

It's the closest you've ever been to seeing a freshly dead person, and you can feel your stomach turning at the thought of the gruesome image that waits around the wall.

"Stay with us, sir. Don't try sneaking a peek at the crime scene if it's going to turn you into dead weight."

You're not so afraid of the sight of blood that you're going to pass out from it, but you're quick to admit to the officers that you're overwhelmed, and would like the chance to sit back down.

"That's fine. We'll walk you back to the dining room. Do yourself a favor and don't try to pull a fast one on us, okay? You *seem* innocent, but it's too early to rule anyone out in this one..."

Detective Murphy's words don't offer you any comfort, but at least you know that you'll be returning to presumably the safest room in the hotel. The detectives walk you back to the room and escort you to your seat, and you can't remember the last time that you were so happy to sit down in a comfy chair, and just take a moment to breathe. You really thought that you were about to be arrested for a crime that you didn't commit, but you survived the ordeal, and now, you're able to take a moment to regroup.

"Tom Thatcher, if you would please come with us..."

Detective Walters is quick to call on Tom next, and you're not at all surprised; it's very likely that the officers are going to go down their line of suspects and question everyone individually, at least, as much as possible. Tom looks rather shocked to be called upon despite his well-known history with Helen, but he starts to rise from his chair anyway.

The look on his father's face is positively *dreadful*. He clearly doesn't want to believe that his son is capable of such a heinous act, but the odds are stacked rather heavily against Tom being innocent of this crime. As the officers escort

him out of the room, Edward leans over to you and begins to prod you about what the officers said.

“You’ve got to tell me everything that they told you!” he demands, believing that his authority as the owner of the hotel will sway the fact that you know you *shouldn’t* say anything. “My son may not have loved that girl, but I assure you, he didn’t hate her so vigorously as to **kill** her!”

Despair is making it tough for Edward to keep his voice down, and you’re quick to try and quiet him. His cheeks are flushed, his brow is beading with sweat, and you realize that you could never imagine the mental trauma that he’s going through at this moment...despite all of that, however, your attempts to calm him down seem to be working, and his panting breaths stop just short of a full blown panic attack.

“L-listen, young man...I understand if you can’t tell me what those police officers said, but my son is innocent, I swear by it! I need **you** to try and help clear his name, before they try to arrest him!”

Such a task seems something more suited to the local forensic science team, and as far as you’re concerned, Tom probably **is** the murderer, but you do have your own doubts. There were a lot of new faces at the dinner party, and the detectives already admitted that you only *seemed* innocent. No one had been cleared yet, and it was only a matter of time before a decision was made to hold someone responsible for the murder that night.

It’s hardly an even exchange, but seeing as how you’re not paying for your room, or the copious amounts of alcohol that you’ll be drinking so that you can sleep when this is all over, you do have a bit of a decision on your hands.

“Please, young man, I **beg** of you! Don’t let my son face charges for a crime that I know he didn’t commit!”

It’s the kind of plea that any man who truly loved his son would make. Can you really be so heartless as to ignore it?

To ignore his plea and allow Tom to defend his own innocence, turn to page 190.

To try and find a way to sway the detectives yourself, turn to page 84.

Your mind is divided on whether or not to believe that Tom is innocent, but as the saying goes, “Innocent until proven guilty.” Edward has given you no reason to doubt him to this point, so why not try to help his son out of trouble?

“Oh, thank you so much, young man! You truly are worthy to be the guest of honor of this event...if this keeps Tom out of prison, the Thatcher family will be forever in your debt!”

Sighing quietly with the burden of what you’ve just accepted, you warn Edward to hold his thanks until the evening is over. You remember that Tom warned you of the reputation Helen came with, and you begin to wonder if anyone else was guilty of ever fraternizing with the promiscuous puma.

Of all the guests present that evening, Elisa and Charles Swift were the only repeat attendees that you knew of, and in all likelihood, they’d have at least a little insight to offer you...

“Is there a Mr. Charles Swift present?”

...Of course, it seems that the detectives want to probe Charles first, leaving you with only Elisa as an option to speak to. She didn’t seem too keen on chatting with you again when she saw you talking to Helen, and though that seemed innocent enough, when you put the two together, you begin to wonder if Elisa **knew** that there was a reason to stay far, far away from Helen.

Thinking fast, you wait for the detectives to escort Charles out of the room, and immediately whisper to Edward to keep an eye out for any sort of suspicious activity. He nods silently, and you stand up to walk across the room, to the other end of the dining table, where Elisa is waiting. She looks up at you with a friendly smile that makes you wonder where her bitter demeanor came from at the party.

“Had a feeling you were coming this way. Wanted to share some of your details with a familiar face, I’m betting?”

You explain that you don’t want to tell any details until you get a few of your own. You say that you need answers about the relationship between Tom Thatcher and Helen Flannery, and you need them **now**. Despite your staunch demand, you do your best to come off as polite, hoping not to offend Elisa or arouse any suspicion.

“They hooked up at the first Brookfield Gala, and it turned out that she was just using him as a way to get a free room at the hotel. It’s not the first time that a

woman has used her body to get what she wanted,” Elisa explained, and both her casual explanation and her seemingly familiar tone with the subject make you a little uncomfortable. “But, Tommy Boy there was head over heels for her just from one little night of passion, so when she came back the next year and was flirting with other guys, well...you can imagine how well *that* went over.”

The more you hear, the happier you are that you didn’t have to make good on your offer of a room to Helen, but you try to wash away the thought and have some respect for the newly departed.

“Of course, if Tom had any taste, he could have had a much higher quality woman, one who would have really taken good care of him. It’s a shame that he wasted his time going after girls that were quick to put out, but just as quick to **get out**...oh well. He isn’t *mature* enough for me, anyway.”

The tone of the conversation quickly turns from reminiscence to pure venom, and your ears nearly sting from how bitter Elisa’s words are. When she mentions Tom by name, however, you realize that he never came back in the room, despite Charles being called out next by the detectives. Edward is looking over to you in panic, and you begin to wonder if the detectives have already made their decision. You suddenly have a new prime suspect, and you’re not sure what to do in the current situation.

To probe Elisa for more information, turn to page 95.

To leave the room and try to keep the detectives from arresting Tom, turn to page 90.

“Wait! Stop!” you yell, as you run from the dining room. You can already see that Tom is in handcuffs, and it would seem that Charles is lined up to be the next one apprehended. You’re desperate for options, but it doesn’t appear that there’s any way to keep the detectives from moving forward, and in your tight discussion with Elisa, you didn’t hear, or even realize that the rest of the police force had arrived at the Hotel Chalet, as one might have expected.

You turn to the front doors and immediately, several guns are trained on you. You throw your paws up in the air without hesitation, and try to keep control of your bladder as you gulp in awe of such a show of raw force.

“You’d better have a **damn** good reason for coming out of that dining room,” Detective Murphy states, as he motions for the other officers to lower their guns.

Hastily, you try to explain that Tom Thatcher is innocent. You go on further to state that Charles Swift was in the dining room with you when the power went out...but you realize that you didn’t actually notice where Charles was at all. You were hardly paying any attention to him, past when you first saw him at the party.

“Sounds to me like you’re trying to help cover a couple of asses here,” Detective Murphy suggests, and he’s clearly beyond upset with you for rushing out of the dining room. “Unless you’ve got hard evidence to prove that these two didn’t conspire together and murder Helen Flannery, they’re going to jail tonight, and if you don’t get back in that dining room, you’ll be joining them for obstruction of justice!”

You really want to try and help. You feel like you did the best you could, but as you glance back into the dining room and see the tired, sad eyes of Edward Thatcher, you realize that you’ve jumped the gun. Trying to solve a case before you had all of the necessary pieces, you can only tell the detectives that you believe in the good will of these men, thinking them incapable of committing an act as evil as murder.

Needless to say, it doesn’t even begin to sway Detective Murphy, and though Detective Walters looks a bit more receptive, it doesn’t stop her from slapping a set of handcuffs around the wrists of the dark-furred wolf and pushing him up against a wall.

“Sorry, kid, but these guys are going away for the night, and probably for a long time unless you’ve got something better than that.”

You'd offer something up, but just like Helen, you're out of words, and out of time. You watch helplessly as an innocent pair of men are marched out of the hotel, and you're escorted back to the dining room to sit in your chair and listen to the bitter tears of a suffering old man.

You're sure that the answer is somewhere in this room, but it's too late to find it. It's already...

THE END

You know that you can get at least a little more information out of Elisa if you just keep probing, although her increasingly bitter stance is making you a bit uncomfortable around her. Still, there could be innocent lives on the line, and if Tom really wasn't the killer, that meant that there was still a deadly criminal on the loose. You owed it to the other potential victims in the hotel to at least try and help with the investigation, in your own way.

It takes a little more gentle ribbing, but as the look in Elisa's eyes turns more vicious, you can tell that there's more under the surface.

"So I wanted to jump his bones. So what? He's rich, he's good looking, he's the heir to this ridiculously *lavish* hotel...can you really blame a girl for wanting to get into his pants and change his mind about that dirty whore, Helen?"

Several others within earshot of the conversation gasp at the way that Elisa speaks, talking so poorly of someone who was literally just recently killed.

"Oh, **piss off**, you bunch of ingrates! You all think you're better than me because you whisper what I'm saying out loud? We **all** know what kind of person Helen was, and most of the girls who went to this stupid event every year were just as jealous of her as I was!"

You're quick to point out to her that she seems especially jealous, but you instantly regret your decision, as Elisa swipes a paw at your face and connects, slapping you with such force that you nearly fall out of your chair. Your cheek stings all the way down to the bone, and at the sudden ruckus, Detective Murphy reappears, leaving you to wonder about the fate of Charles, Tom, and Detective Walters outside.

"What's the meaning of all this discourse?" he asks, seeing that you're still reeling from the strike, and Elisa is fuming with rage. She stands up and starts to march for the atrium, but as soon as she passes the wall and turns for the front door, Detective Murphy grabs her and keeps her from leaving, not allowing anyone to exit the building, even as police reinforcements arrive.

"Unhand me...I said *unhand me*, you brute! I'm an innocent victim in all of this and I **demand** that you release me so that I might make it home to my loving family!"

Elisa's words fall on deaf ears, as Detective Murphy procures a set of handcuffs from his belt. "Sorry to eavesdrop, but it sure sounded like you've got a bit of a history with Helen Flannery as well, and we can't have **anyone** leaving until

we've got our murderer caught. Far as we know right now, that could be you!"

Elisa struggles, but she's no match for the raw strength of Detective Murphy, who lets out a groan of regret as he forces her wrists into a pair of handcuffs. Clearly, this was the last course of action he wanted to take, but he's left with no choice, and in moments, Elisa is pinned up against a wall, waiting for the incoming authorities to properly detain her.

"You there, sir...we've got a couple more questions for you, if you still know what planet you're on."

You can appreciate a good sense of humor in such a tense moment, though you think perhaps that Detective Murphy took the notion a bit too far. Standing up under your own power, you walk out of the room and watch as a flood of police officers go into the dining room past you. Everyone in the room is being searched for any sort of weapon or evidence that might be linked to the crime scene, and as the area is blocked off, very few people still stand in the atrium.

It's only you, the detectives, Charles Swift, Tom Thatcher, and Elisa, who you never bothered to learn the last name of. Given the way that she treated you in the dining room just moments ago, you don't imagine she'll be giving you that information anytime soon.

"We've narrowed down our list of suspects to the four of you," Detective Murphy starts to explain. Conveniently enough, you're the only one not in handcuffs yet. "Before I go any further...if any of you wants to come forward and confess to the murder right now and save all of us a lot of trouble and headaches, this is your chance."

There isn't so much as a peep from anyone, but Detective Murphy just nods, as if he were expecting that to be the case.

"No one...no one did it, huh? She just happened to fall on that knife once, and decided it felt so nice, she should try doing it a couple **more** times?"

Still, no one says anything, and shockingly enough, no one even looks close to cracking. You've personally just about ruled Charles Swift out as a suspect in your book, but you can't decide if Elisa seems any more or less guilty than Tom.

"Well then...I guess you all won't mind if we do a quick dusting for paw prints to see if anyone matches the evidence on the knife, now, will you?"

Part of you wants to speak up and confess to the murder just to get this terrible night over with, but you're desperate; you're not *stupid*. You think it's just a matter of time before someone will say something at this point, and you know

your prints aren't on the knife, since the only knife you've touched all night was used at dinner, and assuredly, it's long since been taken back to the kitchen with the rest of the dishes.

"All right. I'm sorry that you all have to see this, then, but...come with me."

You were really hoping to get through the night without having to see Helen's fallen body, but ultimately, the time has come, and you try to gulp back your nerves as Detective Murphy leads the four of you in, and Detective Walters follows immediately behind you, making sure that no one breaks formation. A small gap is left in a barricade that blocks off the formerly vibrant and lively banquet hall, and just around the corner of the wall, laying in a crumpled heap by the bar and riddled with stab wounds is Helen Flannery, doused in a thin coat of her own ichor fluids. You begin to wonder if this is really how an investigation is supposed to operate, but you think that perhaps, Detective Murphy thought that witnessing their handiwork might persuade the murderer to confess...instead, all four of you stand silent, jaws agape and faces twisted up in fear.

Not far from the body, a small table is set up with a quick forensic kit, containing all of the necessary elements to do a rapid dusting of the murder weapon. The detectives aren't messing around: they're intent to solve this murder as quickly as possible, and you have just enough time to turn your head around, watching to see other members of the dinner party being escorted out of the hotel, before Detective Walters grips you by the wrist and tugs you over to the table.

"We don't have to take you out of any handcuffs, so you're first," she explains briefly. "Open your palm and press your thumb down."

You see the ink pad and press your thumb into it as instructed. Detective Walters rolls your wrist for you and moves your paw over to a piece of paper, pressing your thumb down, before repeating the process for your entire paw. You have no apprehension, as all this serves to do is completely clear you from the act of the murder. All you'll have to worry about later on is association, and you're fairly certain that you're clear of that one.

Truth be told, you find it rather fascinating to watch the detectives work, though you do wish you didn't have to see Helen's dead body every time that you glanced over to Detective Murphy. Waiting just long enough for your prints to dry, he quickly uses them as a reference to dust the handle of the knife that is still buried deep in Helen's chest, and gives a quick shake of the head to Detective Walters.

“Well, you didn’t *stab* her, but you still aren’t going anywhere just yet, distinguished guest,” Detective Walters tells you. You find the way that she speaks to you just a little bit insulting, as if your position of prestige means that you’re still a suspect in this murder case, even if you had no ill will or history with Helen, like the other three standing with you.

By this time, the rest of the hotel has been evacuated, and it seems to be just a matter of time before all is said and done. Only Edward Thatcher and the manager are allowed to remain, and both are escorted on either side by policemen, likely for their safety. Once the mystery is solved, they’ll be forced to lock the doors and shut down, at least for the evening, but the reputation of the Hotel Chalet may never recover if the killer isn’t discovered.

You shake with a deep, fearful chill as you realize that one of the three people around you killed someone only minutes before, and that person is certainly capable of killing again. All three of them are in reach of you, and as the investigation continues and Charles Swift is taken over for prints, you can’t help but take notice of his impressive physical stature. It’s no coincidence; you know you heard whispers at the party of his military service overseas, and while he’d decided to be a playboy in his civilian life, he didn’t leave the body of trained soldier behind.

“Doesn’t look like we’ve got a match here, either...” Detective Murphy said to himself, but just loud enough for prying ears to hear, as he dusted the weapon for Charles’ paw prints. “...But...this weapon says ‘Et Tu’ on the handle of it...this knife didn’t come from inside the hotel. Someone brought this in to use as a murder weapon. You did serve time in the military, is that correct, Mister Swift?”

Detective Murphy was doing a great job of playing an average partygoer that evening, and the amount of information that he collected was priceless. You actually find it concerning that a couple of detectives were aware that there might be a murder that evening, and were so on top of their game that they nearly *prevented* it, and yet, you didn’t hear a word of it when you were preparing for the event. Something of this magnitude should have been more heavily publicized, but you realize that it would have been terrible for the reputation of the event, *and* the hotel.

In your mind, that was another strike against Tom.

“Yes, I was in the military, but that is **not** my knife,” Charles immediately denied ownership, though Detective Murphy didn’t look entirely convinced. The marbled green eyes of the orange tabby detective narrowed at the chiseled wolf,

trying to look for any hint of dishonesty in his face, but there was nothing to be found.

Charles might be a man of questionable character in his party-hard lifestyle, but he wasn't a liar, and it left the detectives with only two options left to choose, even if Detective Murphy wasn't convinced that the knife didn't belong to Charles.

"Well, if DNA evidence is all that we have to go off of to make an arrest this evening, that narrows it down to one of you two," Detective Walters suggested, pointing first at Tom Thatcher, and second at Elisa. "You still have a chance to step forward and admit your crime. It's not too late to make this right."

The tension in the room is so thick that if water were discord, you could easily drown in it, and you even start to feel a little short of breath as your curious eyes follow the pointing pawtip of Detective Walters. It's a harsh reality to accept, but one of the two people around you is certainly a killer...

...Or are they?

You certainly don't remember if Charles Swift was in the room or not, but you do distinctly remember that Tom Thatcher was in the room with you when the power went out. The scream was only about fifteen seconds after the power went out, or at least you think, and unless Tom Thatcher was gifted with super speed and stealth, there is no way that he could have committed the murder.

"Wait. Tom Thatcher is innocent."

Your words piece through the thick tension of the moment like a rusty nail through the tire of a car, and two sets of eyes turn on you: a look of hope flashing in the terrified, green orbs of Tom Thatcher, and an enraged glare that could burn holes in your flesh from Elisa.

"And just what proof do you have of that? Why didn't you speak up **sooner**?"

The thoughts that flew through your mind only moments before quickly spill from your muzzle, and Detective Walters opens her eyes wide in shock at what you reveal.

"So Tom Thatcher was **definitely** in the room when you heard the scream?"

You admit that, as far as you can tell, he never could have made it back to the dining room in time to have gotten away with the act undetected.

"Well...let's just see what the paw prints have to say about it, first."

You're sure that you're not the only one who noticed the way that Elisa looked at

you when you proclaimed Tom's innocence, but for the moment, everyone else in the room seems to be ignoring her. The innocence of Tom Thatcher hung in the balance not of your testimony, but in the results of a quick, test, perhaps one that wasn't thorough enough to clear his name, given his history with the body that still rested only a few feet away.

You watch as Elisa bites her lower lip, clearly on edge as Tom Thatcher was accosted, his paw prints going to the duster, and finally, to the handle of the knife that was still buried inside of poor Helen Flannery.

"...No match here," Detective Murphy confirms, as all eyes in the room turn to Elisa.

"What? I was in the room with them as well! There's no way I could have killed her!"

It's clear that the detectives want to make the arrest then and there, but they have to rule out every possibility, and Detective Walters is quick and effective in bringing her over to the table to collect her prints. "Ma'am, I would *highly* recommend that you don't say anything further until you've had a chance to hire an attorney."

Tom Thatcher lets out a breath of relief greater than a man freed from a noose, and you feel your own comfort returning as the person you believe to be the killer is investigated.

Seconds pass, then minutes, and Detective Murphy is left with a quizzical look on his face as he presents Detective Walters with the results of the final dusting.

"...One of you is still the killer, most certainly, but you aren't working **alone.**"

It's quickly obvious to you that Elisa doesn't have any prints on the weapon, and that means that the police will have to test the paw prints of everyone that was present at the party. You realize that this night is just going to keep on getting longer and longer when Detective Murphy and Detective Walters ready their handcuffs again, clearly certain that the killer stands among them, with an accomplice elsewhere.

Their theory is nearly spot on, as just before Detective Walters can place a set of handcuffs on Elisa once more, the power flickers out, and panic erupts in the dining room, across the atrium.

You **freeze.**

The police struggle to try and keep order in the dining room with the other guests who weren't accused, and you stand as still as possible, hoping that no

one would go after you. You realize that if Elisa **is** the killer, you've done a great job of implicating her, but if you run, it's likely that you'll just be a target for the police, and you can't see where you're going, anyway.

To stay put and wait for the power to come back on, turn to page 118.

To try and make it up to your room, where you think you'll be safe, turn to page 208.

You don't know for sure who the killer is, and you're afraid to try and run away from them **or** the police, so you decide to stay put, keeping your ears perked high and your senses as sharp as possible. If someone is going to assault you, perhaps you can hear them coming before they arrive.

"Hurry up and get the power turned back on!" Detective Murphy shouts to the other officers, and within the course of a minute, they find the circuit breaker panel in the hotel. Beams from flashlights are everywhere as the police struggle to contain the chaos, and then, in an instant, everyone is squinting from the lights coming back on.

No one else has been taken down, but the knife has been taken from Helen's body, and without that piece of evidence, the detectives have nothing to use as a means of tying someone to the murder itself. Things have taken a **massive** step backwards, and Detective Murphy is visibly frustrated by the whole situation.

"I want two officers guarding that circuit breaker at all times. If the power goes out again, there'd better be two dead police officers in front of that electrical box!" he demands, and it's clear just how easily he can throw his weight around in the department. Two officers head straight to the circuit breaker, hidden in a small utility closet by the back of the banquet hall.

"The knife was taken, and the person who took it wasn't in this room, but the person who *did* take it must have known the layout of the hotel," Detective Walters deduces, as she looks at the kitchen doors that lead into the banquet hall. Sure enough, doors open up to the other side and into the dining room, meaning that the kitchen passes all the way through, and someone could easily make the trip between the two rooms, relatively undetected, and return in time to kick the power back on...there was a short warm-up period before the lights came to full illumination, and that was enough for the detectives to accost Tom Thatcher once again. "I'm sure your father would be deeply upset to see the kind of monster that you've turned out to be, Tom Thatcher!"

Tom doesn't resist, but his face is visibly twisted in frustration as Detective Walters steps behind him and forces him into cuffs. Your words have done absolutely nothing to verify his innocence now, leaving Tom to defend himself... and he's got only one out.

"Elisa knows this hotel every bit as well as any of the employees!" he declared, even as Detective Murphy stood in front of him to keep him from trying to escape. "She easily could have used the passage within the kitchen to make the

kill earlier this evening!”

DNA evidence would suggest that she didn't, but you're not convinced of her innocence in the whole plot. Something about the writing on the handle of the knife stuck out to you when you saw it up close, and even if it has military implications, you don't think that it belonged to Charles Swift, as originally indicated.

You focus on your hunch as Tom Thatcher does his best to keep himself in the room, knowing that the further he is from the situation, the harder it would be to capture the real killer. His own words may have damned him, however.

“We didn't say anything about the passage in the kitchen, Mr. Thatcher.”

Detective Murphy's words drain all of the color from Tom Thatcher's face. Looking more like a ghost than anything now, his lower lip trembles and his legs start to shake as he realizes the implications of his knowledge.

“You didn't say it...but I'm telling you that she knows about it, and could have used it!”

“Who *else* could have used it?”

“The five people in the hotel who know the most about it are myself, my father, the front desk manager, Elisa Cornell, and Helen Flannery. Seeing as how one of them is dead, I promise that she didn't use it, and my father isn't so flight of foot that he could have made use of the passage. I'm telling you, the killer is either Elisa or the front desk manager!”

Tom isn't doing himself a lot of favors in his sudden and brash accusations, but you do your best to try and take down every detail mentally, as if the detectives aren't doing the same. You even make a note of Elisa's last name, now that you've finally heard it.

“I know we just gave this advice to Elisa, but I think you'd better just be quiet until your father can get the family attorney on the phone,” Detective Murphy suggests. He's a much sterner person than Detectives Walters, who you notice is still scanning the room for anything that might have been missed. “If you're lucky, having a rich dad will keep you from serving back to back life sentences.”

Concerned that an innocent man might be off to jail, knowing just how much his father is counting on you, you step up one last time, trying to think of something, *anything* to stall the investigation and shift the blame a little bit.

“Elisa...how long have you wanted to date Tom Thatcher?”

Your question derails the mood of the moment, to be sure. The detectives at first tell you to be quiet, but then, Detective Walters realizes that you know more than you've let on, and your words might just have been the catalyst to turn this thing around.

"Wait...you two have a history, Ms. Cornell?"

"We have **no** history," Elisa Cornell tries to deny, but that draws an awful glare from Tom, who clearly disagrees. "He's just a fool who was lovesick over Helen Flannery, and when he couldn't have her, he decided that no one should be able to."

"Sounds to me like you two have quite a bit of history," Detective Walters continues to pry at the subject, like a child picking at a scab after their mother told them not to. "Mr. Thatcher, did you and Ms. Cornell ever have a romantic relationship?"

"I wasn't particularly interested in her," Tom admits. "She can try to deny it all she wants, but I've set a fire in her loins since she started working the Brookfield Gala, whether or not I want to take the opportunity to have it."

You remember just what a funny and strange thing love is, as you watch the discussion unfold. Helen Flannery was a *gorgeous* woman, no doubt, but Elisa Cornell isn't any slouch in appearance, and yet, Tom Thatcher considered himself to be too good for her, at least, so you think.

"What woman would want to be involved with a murderous psychopath like you, Tom?"

"Actually," you chime in, "You mentioned to me that you thought he wasn't mature enough for you, in the dining room."

Elisa shoots daggers at you once again with her glare, and her emotions implicate her once again, as Detective Walters takes a curious glance at the angry female.

"Is that so...? Sounds to me like you might have a little more information than we can afford to lose," Detective Walters suggests, looking at you after she scanned Elisa. "I think it would be best if we interrogated you somewhere in private. If you've got nothing to hide, your hotel room should suffice."

Clearly, the detectives want to keep everyone on the property until they know exactly what's going on, and as a few extra officers enter the banquet hall to guard Charles Swift, Tom Thatcher and Elisa Cornell, the detectives place you in handcuffs for the first time and escort you to the elevators. If you've got

anything to hide, they'll find it, and if you have any proper information to give out, they'll extract it from you somehow. Your nerves are rattled once again as the elevator arrives in the upstairs lobby, not because you **do** have anything to hide, but because the situation just makes you nervous. There could be a second killer on the loose, and if the detectives get taken down, you're in handcuffs, at the mercy of whoever it might be.

Detective Murphy frisks you for your room key and opens the door as you tell them your room number. You ignore just how nice the room is for the moment, knowing that you shouldn't look away from the detectives as they sit you down on the couch to interrogate you.

"We understand that this likely makes you a little bit nervous. Would you care for a drink?" Detective Murphy asks, as he lifts a bottle from the weighted wet bar in your kitchenette. You figure that you're not going to have to pay for a thing this evening, and because your handcuffs are done in the front, you can actually lift the glass to drink it.

Hastily, you nod, and Detective Murphy procures a glass, pouring a small amount of the contents of the bottle inside. You watch as the caramel colored liquid splashes around and up the sides of the glass, finding the show to be nothing less than a hurricane trapped inside of a stadium. Your Achilles heel sits on the coffee table in front of you, and you lift it to your lips...only to decide that the bourbon smells a little funny.

You've had a lot of bourbon in your life, and this particular brand plenty of times. It's never smelled like this.

"Something wrong, buddy?" Detective Murphy asks.

You shake your head, but suddenly, your appetite for the drink is starting to fade. Perhaps it's best to just get this over with?

To take a drink anyway, turn to page 132.

To skip the drink and get on with the interrogation, turn to page 201.

You decide that it could just be your nerves making the bourbon smell unusual, and you take a quick, cautionary sip.

Immediately, your stomach starts to turn, and you know that it isn't nerves making it happen.

"S-something's wrong," Detective Walters declares, as you instantly start to convulse. Your stomach gets a lot closer to your throat, and you feel like you're going to throw up that small sample of booze, but at this point, you've got much bigger problems to worry about. "What was in that bottle, Murphy?!"

Detective Murphy makes sure to set the bottle aside as you collapse from the couch and fall into the fetal position. Your center of balance is lost, your body is failing, and you can take a guess at a number of poisons that were in that glass.

None of them were alcohol, and nothing is going to save you from an early grave. The detectives know now that you're innocent, but it comes at a higher cost than you can afford...you only live once, after all.

THE END

You immediately mention the way that Elisa Cornell spoke down of Tom Thatcher the entire time that you discussed him at dinner. You ask the detectives if they know anything more about her, since they were working on a hunch that the murder might happen tonight, anyway.

“Elisa has known the Thatcher family longer than she’s been working the event. As the owners of the hotel, they encouraged the proprietors of the event to get her more involved, or so we’ve been told,” Detective Murphy shares what he knows. “Thanks to you, we’re aware of the fact that there was a little something extra going on between Tom and Elisa, or rather, that she wanted there to be.”

You wonder aloud if Elisa knew anything about the fact that Helen Flannery effectively owed the Thatcher family a debt, and the detectives join you on your pondering.

“It’s entirely possible,” Detective Walters admits. “She didn’t have a high opinion of Helen to begin with, and the fact that Helen slept around to pay for her nights at the hotel was basically public knowledge.”

It’s starting to become clearer to you. You ask Detective Walters if Elisa ever paid for **her** own room.

“Y’know...come to think of it, I’m not sure if she’s ever paid for a hotel room here at the Hotel Chalet. She seems to hold Helen on a different standard, but as involved as she is in the event, there’s no way to know if she ever paid for a room or not, short of checking the financial records of the hotel.”

A couple of different hunches are starting to come together for you. You explain that you’re sure that you and Charles Swift were invited to this event to be nothing more than red herrings for the real killers, and you’re convinced that Elisa Cornell is one of them.

“But who would Ms. Cornell be working with?” Detective Walters asks, as you start to smile, feeling rather clever for a couple of things that you’re starting to put together.

Your response is blunt, but it’s the best lead that the detectives have.

“Whoever she stayed with for the past five Brookfield Galas.”

Detective Murphy gives you a stern glance, thinking that perhaps you’re trying to do his job better than he is, but you’ve simply got more information, and you’ve had plenty of time to think things over. Elisa Cornell had a grudge against Tom Thatcher that went deeper than an affair, and if you were right about

your hunch, someone else shared in that grudge, though that part of the mystery, you hadn't quite figured out.

You only had one other suspect, and you only had their motive left to figure out.

To suggest to the detectives that you go investigate the records of who Elisa Cornell stayed with, turn to page 206.

To tell them about the inscription on the knife, turn to page 139.

You think to bring up the inscription on the handle of the knife. You're sure that there's something more to it, and the detectives spent so much time looking at it that you're wondering if they could have missed your hunch.

"The inscription said 'Et Tu.' It's a military term meaning 'at ease.' What of it?" Detective Murphy asks, seeing how you've implied all along that Charles Swift isn't guilty of anything.

You tell him that you think, perhaps, the knife didn't belong to Charles Swift at all, and in fact, that it might implicate someone that wasn't even remotely involved before.

"Who else could the knife belong to?" Detective Walters asks, crossing her arms over her chest and giving you a look with a raised brow. Even **she** thinks that you're fishing on this one, but you feel confident.

"Edward Thatcher."

Both of the detectives give you a confused look at first, but you explain that the "E" and the "T" on the knife handle were both done with rather exquisite detail, and were in one font...but the "t" and the "u" were done in a different font, clearly at a later time. It's been bugging you all night, but the knife originally only had an "E" and a "T" on it. You confirm to the detectives that you're sure of this, with only one problem: the knife is gone, making it impossible to confirm your claim.

"Even if everything you're saying is true, why would Edward Thatcher want to kill Helen Flannery?" Detective Murphy asks, still skeptical of your reasoning.

You bring up the debt that Helen owed to the Hotel Chalet, and the way that she refused to pay for rooms with actual money. You propose that there might be a deeper grudge held by the old man than there was even by the younger Thatcher.

Edward Thatcher was a proud old man, and one who cared deeply for his son, but he'd worked hard his entire life to build up his fortune, and that same fortune was going to be passed down to Tom Thatcher at the moment of his passing. He didn't have many years left on Earth, and surely, the weight of his decision was weighing on his mind, especially in regards to his son, who was rather far up in his years to still be single.

He'd have to pick a wife eventually, and it would have to be someone that Edward Thatcher could trust, if Tom were ever unable to run the company.

You explain this logic to the detectives, and suddenly, your crazy hunch feels

that much saner. Detective Murphy is actually aghast at the implications, but he's starting to come around to the idea.

"So you really think that somehow, Edward Thatcher is connected to this murder, even if he just supplied the weapon?"

You explain that with his knowledge of the layout of the hotel, Edward wouldn't have just provided the weapon. He could have easily gone through the kitchen, stabbed Helen, and made his way back, all while someone else went to trip the circuit breaker. If someone else knew of the passage, which Tom Thatcher confirmed that he and Elisa **both** did, there was no reason why the same passage couldn't have been used by the one who turned the lights back on.

A grand plan was starting to unravel in front of you and the detectives, and you were sure that it would be only minutes before the killer would strike again to try and cover up any further evidence you could supply. Time was of the essence, and you knew that if Edward Thatcher was involved, he'd be doing everything he could to use the secrets of the Hotel Chalet to cover up the evidence.

"We need to go get his prints, **now**," Detective Murphy suggested. "Detective Walters, stay here with this guy and see if he's got any information left to squeeze out."

You aren't about to complain about being left alone with an admittedly gorgeous detective, but you also aren't sure that you've entirely cleared your good name. Detective Walters appears to trust you...Detective Murphy does *not*, seeing how you were so easily able to provide so much information about the case that they'd missed.

Detective Murphy makes his way out of the room as Detective Walters makes herself a little more comfortable. Her pistol, hidden by a small garter around her upper thigh, occasionally flashes into view, giving you a feeling of safety from the killer, and a feeling of fear that she might end up using it on you if you implicate yourself.

"If you've got anything left to say, kid, you'd better say it now. If your hunch is wrong, then the wrong person could be going to jail, and you aren't even *close* to being off the hook yet."

Perhaps there was at least one thing you neglected to mention, or at least, to suggest.

Thinking fast, you mention to Detective Walters the way that Elisa Cornell was so focused on maturity. She claimed that Tom Thatcher wasn't mature enough

for her, and yet, she was clearly desperate to be with Tom, even if she could never explain why she found him attractive.

“So? What of maturity?”

You point out that Elisa Cornell always wanted to get involved with Tom Thatcher, but that she couldn't. You suggest the connection between this, and the fact that the Thatcher family encouraged the governing body of the Brookfield Gala to give Elisa a more important role in the running of the event. If she and Tom Thatcher didn't get along, there's no way that he would have been on board with such a decision, meaning that only one other member of the family would actually approve of such a thing.

“You think that Edward Thatcher and Elisa Cornell are an item?”

You shake your head, unsure of whether that is true or not, but you're convinced that they're working together, and Helen Flannery was the target they both wanted gone...it would give Elisa the fast lane to steal Tom Thatcher away, and ensure to Edward Thatcher that his son wasn't married to an irresponsible woman.

Verbally, it sounds like the plot of a murder mystery movie.

In practice, however, as Detective Walters thinks it over, she realizes that you may have cracked the whole case wide open. She keeps the handcuffs on you, but yanks you up from the couch and tugs to toward the door.

“Come with me, buddy. We've got a pair of criminals to catch.”

Turn to page 149.

By the time Detective Walters has escorted you back down to the lobby, Detective Murphy already has Elisa Cornell in a fresh set of handcuffs, but otherwise, the police force looks confused, and Tom Thatcher, still handcuffed, is pleading his case.

“Wait just a minute! He’s innocent!”

Your cry gives clarity to the moment, and Edward Thatcher, guarded on either side by a police escort, grins from ear to ear as you walk down the stairs of the main atrium and into the lobby floor. He knew that he could count on you to find his son innocent.

He just didn’t know that you’d find the man who was truly responsible for it.

Before the results of the paw prints from Edward Thatcher have even been finished, Detective Walters walks into the chaos with you and explains what you told her in the hotel room. Detective Murphy listens, as they keep the conversation between them in quiet, but the whole time, between his police escort, Edward Thatcher starts to look a little nervous.

“Are you sure, Detective Walters? Can we really trust this guy?”

“If we had a knife to measure his prints to, then we could find out...”

The entire investigation now hinges on the lost murder weapon. Officers give Elisa Cornell a quick pat down, and unless she’s sacrificing her own life to hide the knife, it’s definitely not on her person. She screams and yells about being unjustly molested as the pat down continues, making sure that she isn’t in possession of anything else that could be dangerous, before the detectives walk you over to converge on Edward Thatcher.

“I knew that I could trust you to show those detectives the light, my friend! The moment I laid eyes on you, I just knew that you would keep my precious Tom out of trouble. Who would have thought that Elisa could be capable of something so...so very **dreadful**?”

Though still handcuffed, you make a small gesture at the man himself. “**You.**”

“I’m sorry...what are you trying to imply?”

“Mr. Thatcher, we need access to the records of what room Elisa Cornell stayed in for the last five Brookfield Gala events,” Detective Murphy demanded, drawing an instant look of pitiful sadness from the older gentleman.

“I’m afraid that information is confidential,” Edward Thatcher replied, his voice

not quite dripping, but certainly laced with a little venom. “I simply **can’t** be sharing that with you.”

“Then we’ll have to arrest you for interfering with a police investigation and obstruction of justice,” Detective Murphy explained very plainly, his voice echoing no sympathy for the old man, despite how fearful he was starting to appear.

“I...I don’t have those records. Nope.”

It was the last, pathetic attempt of a guilty man to make up a story for his freedom.

“I don’t suppose you have a knife anywhere on your person either, do you?” Detective Walters cut in, her paws resting on her hips as she leered in at the aging owner of the Hotel Chalet. Despite how happy he’d looked only moments before at your work to help his son, his face was now twisted up with fear, like a man who knew he was soon to see the afterlife, but not yet ready to face it. Tears were welling up in the corners of his eyes as he tried to look for a way out of the moment, but it was clear as day that he’d been caught when his police escort suddenly turned into a cavity search...though they didn’t have to look very far for what they wanted.

A knife, although cleaned, was sitting in the back pocket of his dress pants, with a small inscription on the handle: “Et Tu.”

“Th-that doesn’t prove **anything!** That’s just my personal knife! I keep it on me for protection!”

The desperate cries of an aging man didn’t dissuade the stone-faced Detective Murphy one bit. “Then why did we find a knife with a matching handle buried in the chest of one Helen Flannery, about thirty feet away from here?”

This time, it was Tom Thatcher who felt his face twisting up in horror. “F-father...you...you didn’t...you **couldn’t!**”

Fear became rage in an instant as Edward Thatcher glared over at his son. “I could, because **you** couldn’t marry her! I worked hard for years, long before you were ever born, to turn this hotel into a respectable business from the ground up! If you’d gone and married a nice girl like Elisa, I wouldn’t have to worry about all of this, but you...you would have overlooked the amount of money Helen was in debt to this hotel for something as antiquated and **stupid** as love!”

It was true that Helen Flannery didn’t feel the same love for Tom Thatcher that he felt for her, but in the end, it was the twisted words of his own father that

made Tom realize just how desperate Elisa Cornell was to get involved in the organization.

“So...you would have had Elisa marry me, just because she would have been better suited to inherit the company than Helen?!”

“Oh, don’t give yourself that much credit!” Elisa cut in, as the unraveled plan turned into a controlled chaos between the three. “Soon as the old man kicked the bucket, I would have offed you and taken over the company for myself! You’re an immature, selfish, arrogant **playboy**, with all of the business sense of a child running a lemonade stand!”

Elisa might have still gotten away with just a slap on the wrist, but her words confirmed your suspicions in the hotel room: Elisa Cornell had conspired with Edward Thatcher all along to kill Helen Flannery, so that she might become part of the Hotel Chalet family.

“And you...” she groaned, her eyes filled with hatred as you could feel them on your skin, “If **you** had just taken your drink at the start of the night like I wanted you to, I could have pinned the whole thing back on the old man...leaves the door wide open for me to comfort Tom when daddy winds up in jail so I can wife him and then kick his ass into a grave!”

Now you know who planted the tainted alcohol in your room. All you ever did to her was hold a door open for her and recall to the police what she’d said that night. A few choice words cross your mind, *bitch* being among them, but at the same time, you happily wear a smirk at the anger of the murderous woman. She’s buried herself with conspiracy to commit murder more than your words ever could have, and thanks to your solid memory and quick thinking, Detective Murphy and Detective Walters can make the proper arrests, and start to pick up the pieces.

Your handcuffs are undone, and Tom Thatcher, released from his own, approaches you.

“I can’t deny being more than a little upset with you for getting my father thrown in jail,” he speaks, as he watches the older Thatcher march off in a set of handcuffs, “But you’ve truly lifted a weight off of my shoulders. I could feel the pressure every single day, of my father wanting me to make Elisa my wife, but she and I never would have been happy together...and even if it were to one day cost me the family business, I’d rather be happy with nothing than be miserable with **everything**.”

You tell Tom that he’s a wise young man, and you think that he made the right

decision, trying to find love and happiness instead of riches. You comment that it's a shame that Helen has passed, but now, Tom can finally move on in his love life and try to find someone that will love him for who he is.

"I suppose I can't really brag about being the owner of the Hotel Chalet, after all of this," he admits, knowing that the incident will cripple hotel attendance for a while. "But it'll be nice to see what a woman is like when they actually sit down and get to know me for more than the checkbook I carry around."

You know that the road to recovery will be a long one for Tom Thatcher, and though it's much briefer, Charles Swift thanks you for doing your part to clear his name, as well. You make a suggestion to Tom Thatcher that he should try to host the Brookfield Gala again a week later, and to your surprise, he actually agrees to the proposition, on the condition that you agree to return once again as the guest of honor.

It was a disaster the first time through, but you let out a sigh of relief, knowing that **anything** will be better than your first stay at the Hotel Chalet; you were lucky just to survive, and you can't wait for the police to clean up the rest of the mess so that you can cash in on the offer of free bourbon...you're going to need quite a bit of it to muster the courage to ever walk back through those double doors.

Justice, like your eventual drink, is finally served, and you find the taste of the former to be even sweeter than the latter.

The End

You decide that you're in too much of a rush, and frankly too awestruck by the incredible sights inside the hotel to hold the door open.

You simply don't have the foresight to realize how important the woman actually is, and, of course, though it isn't your intention, you start the evening off on the wrong footpaw...by breaking hers, when it gets caught in the heavy, closing door.

A sickening, gut-wrenching **KRACK** draws your attention back to the door, and you watch as a woman in a red dress collapses just outside the door, holding onto her footpaw and cursing to the high heavens about how rude you were. You'd like to ignore it, honestly, since you weren't *trying* to be rude, but she doesn't care...and neither do the other guests who rush outside and come to her aid.

"This **jackass** just slammed a door on my leg!" she screams, as a couple of hotel staff members rush outside to her aid. You open your muzzle to try and explain that you didn't do any such thing, and that it was an accident, but she doesn't care, and the hotel staff members are quick to surround you. You have no idea who the lady is, but she's rather important, to be sure...and as you're grabbed by both arms and tossed from the Hotel Chalet, all while the woman is taken inside, you figure that your distinction as the guest of honor probably isn't going to get you back in.

With your opportunity blown, you retire to your apartment in midtown and eat an entire carton of ice cream by yourself before passing out in your bed. You learned only one thing from the evening: always hold the door open for the person behind you, or it could lead to...

THE END

There are quite a few different, tempting bottles in your private mini-bar, but you decide that it would be for the best if you left them alone for the moment. You'll reward yourself with a drink when the time is right, and you figure that you won't have earned a drink until you've finished your speech and done a satisfactory job.

That won't prevent you from taking a drink or two when you finally get to the party, of course, but at this point, there's no need to push your luck that much further. You put the bottles back for the moment and head back to the elevator, thinking that the party might already be winding down. There's no way to know from all the way up on the tenth floor, but it's a pretty safe bet that people are starting to make their way over to the dining room. At this point, you're just hoping that you haven't missed out on **all** of the action.

Hastily, you return to the main lobby and the atrium, enjoying the build up to the moment as the elevator takes a nice, relaxing ride down to the front desk.

Turn to page 28.

If you were a bit surer of yourself, and perhaps, a bit more familiar with Helen as a person, you'd be willing to let her stay in your hotel room overnight. However, you've only just met her, and though she seems like a wonderful, friendly person, common sense gets the better of you, and you do your best to politely turn Helen away, saying that you don't think it would be the best idea.

“And just what makes ya say that? I **know** what kinda room ya got up there. It's plenty enough for ten people, much less two!”

Not wanting to insult the rather lovely puma, but not being sure of the best way to approach the topic, you tell her that you simply like to have your privacy in the evening. It's not an outright lie, and it's a better idea than pretending that you have a significant other, kids, or something of that nature, as you get the impression that Helen could easily find out the truth, somehow.

“Y'know, I'd be quiet as a field mouse, stranger...”

This time, you're sure that you hear an element of seduction in Helen's voice. You can't deny the thrill that runs down from your spine and comes to settle in the pit of your tummy, but a woman that's this willing and eager to bed someone that she just met makes you that much more apprehensive to accept her proposition. Smiling warmly to try and soften the blow, you shake your head and once again, you insist that you'd prefer to have the room to yourself.

“Very well then, *honorable* guest,” she replies, her words more than a little bitter, and certainly sarcastic as she mentions your honor. It seems that Helen isn't the kind of girl who's worried about chivalry as long as she gets what she wants out of the deal, and since she isn't going to get that this evening, she turns to walk away from you with a scowl and a *huff*.

It seems she has no shame about making a scene, either, but luck smiles on you that this time, she kept her voice down, for the most part. It doesn't keep an orange tabby cat and his gorgeous dancing partner, a doe in a tight, form-fitting dress from looking at you for a moment, but you've never met them before, and you *certainly* don't recognize them. Wishing that they would just mind their own business, you try to ignore just how sour the night suddenly feels, and wonder if it might just be for the best to make your way up to your room to be alone until you're called upon to speak.

Before you can leave, however, you feel a paw on your shoulder, and you see a glass being offered to you by a man you'd noticed when you first entered the party: Tom Thatcher himself.

“Don’t let it get you down, pal. She’s a real handful, that one...and you really didn’t miss out on much if she shot you down.”

You explain that you were actually the one doing the rejection this time, and hastily take the glass that was offered, needing a sip of the creature after such a tense moment. You hate to disappoint people, but you just can’t find it in your heart to trust Helen so easily.

“Is that so? I’ve gotta admit, I’m kinda surprised, but all the same...you seem like you’ve got a pretty solid head on your shoulders. You must have had your reasons if you didn’t want her up in your room. I hope you aren’t planning on doing anything **illegal** in our hotel this evening...?”

Rapidly, you shake your head and try to quell your nerves. You explain, just as you did to Helen, that you like to have a little privacy when you sleep.

“Some people are just that way, I suppose,” he comments. “Personally, I’d rather have someone to hold onto in my sleep, especially if she was going to be the body next to mine...I guess you’ve just done me a favor, really. What’s your name, stranger?”

You tell Tom Thatcher who you are, explain that you’re the guest of honor, and he’s quick to lighten up to you. You realize that your voice and opinion are really starting to mean something when his attitude does a half turn, as if he suddenly has to butter you up because of your distinction.

“Why didn’t you just say so? I can see why you turned Helen away, then; you could have any woman that you want here! I gotta say, I really envy you, pal, but I’m sorry if I came across as being a little harsh. Feel free to treat yourself to anything at the bar, my treat, and I really hope that you enjoy your stay in the Hotel Chalet.”

Now you’re *certain* that Tom Thatcher is just trying to butter you up, but you really don’t mind, and in fact, your ears perk straight up in the air as you’re given free reign of any sort of alcohol. Tom actually goes so far as to escort you to the bar and order a drink for you, telling you that you’ve simply got to try it, and though you’ve never heard of a Bitter Boxcar, you find the taste of it quite to your liking. There’s subtle hints of orange and chocolate on the tongue that actually *compliment* the bourbon in the cocktail, and before long, you’ve forgotten all about just how much of a stiff Tom seemed to be.

Some amount of time passes; you’d guess that it’s at least half an hour, and you try to be conscious of how much you’re drinking. Two or three cocktails isn’t a lot for someone of your drinking ability, but you also don’t want to end up with

your pants around your ankles, stumbling through the dining room and going on and on about how the bartender makes a mean Bitter Boxcar.

You tell Tom Thatcher that you'd better start getting ready, and he agrees with you. "Don't worry. I'm sure that you'll give a *fine* speech," he suggests, and though you're sure he's just being overly friendly to you, his words **do** sound sincere. You hold onto them as you take a final, tantalizing swig of your drink and stand up to walk away.

It's time to take your seat...or is it?

To take your seat at the dining table and prepare for your speech, turn to page 43.

To go up to your room one last time until you're called upon, turn to page 176.

Sure, the dining room looks really nice, but you've got a decent buzz going at this point, and you think that it might be the perfect time to go and try some of those special bottles in your hotel room. Just one more shot should be the *perfect* amount to keep you loose and keep the creative juices flowing through your head.

The ride up in the elevator is quick, so much so that you're starting to think that you don't need another drink whatsoever, but it isn't the idea to go and try one of the new bottles that keeps you from turning right back around.

It's the fact that, as you approach your room, you smell a familiar perfume and aren't at all surprised to see that Helen Flannery is standing just outside of your room.

You can piece together that she must have just gone to the front desk and asked what room you were staying in, but you're surprised to see her there at this particular moment.

"Listen...ya need to let me in your room. I need a place to hide."

Your brow raises up for a moment as you walk to the door of your room and use the key to unlock it. As you do, you ask her why she might need a place to hide at the moment. Given your interlude earlier, you assume that she's just using a cheesy pick-up line to try and bed you, but as you enter your room, she doesn't have the kind of nerves about her that a promiscuous woman would usually have.

She's chewing her claws, shaking slightly, and bouncing back and forth on her footpaws as she hurries into the room. You take note of each and every little nervous twitch as you decide that, with this kind of stress in the mix, you'll really need that drink. You gather up a bottle from the mini-bar and a couple of glasses from the kitchenette, and tell Helen to take a seat on the couch.

She does just as you tell her, and you pour a healthy amount of fluid into each glass. Instructing her to take a drink to calm her nerves, she takes a rather healthy gulp...but it's **your** nerves that are immediately fried thereafter.

"Helen...?" you ask, as you watch her once bright, brilliant eyes start to shrink. Her pupils are the size of needles as she drops the glass from her paw, spilling the rest of the contents into the carpet, and immediately, she wraps her paws around her throat, as if to imply that she's choking.

Even in your room, she wasn't safe, and you start to wonder if you were, either.

Her cheeks begin to flush, and within seconds, she's a sweating, convulsing mess. You watch helplessly as she crumples down across the cushions of the couch, and you realize only a moment too late that she had plenty of reason to feel unsafe...the very reason that she did is standing in your doorway, leering down at you with a knife in their right paw.

“Y...you!”

No one else is anywhere nearby to hear you as you call out for help, and all of it is in vain, as the presumed murderer lunges forth and buries the knife in your chest with a surprising amount of speed and skill. The blow lands a blade right in the center of your heart, and as you instantly begin to choke on your own blood, you know that your life is over, no matter what you try and do with your final moments.

After the light has finally faded from your eyes, your body is moved around, and your paw is placed around the handle of the knife to try and cover up any fingerprints. It's made to look like a murder-suicide; someone at the party wanted Helen dead, and you were to be framed to be the murderer.

In your final moment of consciousness, you wish that you'd just taken your seat at the dining table...though you die with the knowledge that you would have been sitting with a monster.

THE END

For some reason, you get the impression that knowing about Helen and Tom's past could be of great importance to you, so you decide to try and pry a little deeper into that.

"I'm not really a big fan of gossip," Edward admits, "But if you must know, my son was rather infatuated with Helen for quite a time, and as far as I've been told, they shared relations at least once...when love was a part of the equation, Tom didn't care about Helen getting to have a free hotel room, but once she stopped sharing those free rooms with him, it became a rather **serious** issue."

"Can't say I'm surprised by that," you reply, and you're quick to explain that you don't mean anything negative by it.

"I know you don't," Edward says, "But all the same, this is one subject that I wish I could simply bury. I may not have a serious problem with Helen, but I do think it would be for the best if she were out of my son's life, *permanently*. If not for the fact that she's on the planning committee for the Brookfield Gala, I'm sure that she'd never be allowed to set a footpaw in the door."

Edward Thatcher's words are a little bit morose, to say the least, but you do see his point. If Helen is an unwelcome distraction, or a floosy, she isn't really doing Tom any favors by hanging around, and you point that out to his father.

"With any luck, my son will have the gall to say to the committee what I've never been able to, and tell them that she isn't welcome here next year."

It's the last thing that Edward Thatcher has to say on the subject, and you apologize for prying into the affair. He shakes his head just a little bit as he glances down at the table, refusing to share just what is so heavily weighing on his mind in regards to the touchy topic.

Turn to page 55.

You know that it'll be a pointless endeavor to try and get more information from Edward Thatcher about his son and Helen, but you think that, if Jim Karns has been the master of ceremonies for this event for a decent amount of time, maybe he knows something about their relationship.

You stand up, push your chair back, and take your first step out of the chair... only to have one of the waiters place a paw on your shoulder and guide you back down to your seat.

"I'm deeply sorry, but I must ask you to be seated until all of the food has been passed out. We can't have someone getting tripped and spilling an entire meal!"

Rather embarrassed at being called out in such a way, you opt to slump right back down into your seat and apologize to the waiter who stopped you. They just politely smile and continue on their way, and now, you're pretty discouraged from trying to make your way to Jim.

Better just wait and enjoy the food after all, you think.

Turn to page 57.

Though it wouldn't have been your first choice, heroism gets the better of you, and you decide to run into the darkness, heading blindly toward an unknown danger.

Normally, a heroic act carried along with it some sort of a reward. In this case, it carried a capital punishment.

You can barely see, and your eyes continue to struggle to adjust to the darkness as you run toward the banquet hall, sure that it was the source of the noise. Adrenaline is rushing through your body with all of the same pumping intensity of the blood in your veins, and you try to recall the last time that you felt so **alive**. You're sure that you could take on any challenge that life could throw at you.

Of course, as anyone could tell you, it helps to be able to *see* those challenges coming.

The moment your footpaw steps into the banquet hall, you feel your balance faltering. Your legs fly out from underneath you as you slide through a slowly trickling river of blood, one that you can't see, but immediately, you can smell it.

The lights start to kick on just in time for you to see the identity of the killer, but they've got the drop on you, and mercy isn't in their playbook: the already dripping knife in their paws is removed from the body of Helen Flannery, only to be swung across your neck, gashing right across your throat. Cold steel contacts the back of your neck, and before your eyes can even close, you know that your fate is sealed.

Helen Flannery was never given a chance to repay her debts to the Hotel Chalet, but it's **you** who has to pay the ultimate price for her hard-and-fast lifestyle. In your final moments, you try to scream the name of your assailant, but a flood of crimson pours down your esophagus, leaving you to do little more than sputter and collapse in your own spilled essence.

So many details are left unclear, but one thing among all is certain. This is...

THE END

Edward Thatcher *seems* to be a very nice man, and it's clear that he only has the safety of his son in mind, but as far as you're concerned, the safest place for you to be is the dining room, and you don't care to try and interfere with a police investigation.

Though you can already see his heart breaking at your answer, you tell Edward that you won't be trying to help clear the good name of his son. It's simply too dangerous, and you don't have any sort of evidence that would help to clear his name. Rather, you feel you only have information that would damn him to a jail sentence.

"But...but you're a guest of **honor!** Why would you decline such a thing at the sense of danger?"

You know that the man is old, but you don't think his memory is so bad that you should have to remind him that your only information would be damaging to his case. Letting out a quiet sigh, you shake your head and simply keep an ear perked to the investigation in the atrium, though it's hard to hear over the controlled chaos in the dining room, and a whiny old man who won't stop bugging you to help.

"Some guest you turned out to be," he says as he glares at you through tired, old eyes. "I hope you know that you'll never be welcome at the Hotel Chalet ever again, if my son is found guilty of this crime!"

To have the old man be upset at you for not being *able* to help is one thing. For him to threaten something so ridiculous because you're trying to avoid getting arrested for obstruction of justice? **Now** you're mad.

You demand that Edward Thatcher show you a little respect, and you yell at him in front of everyone that his son likely **isn't** the killer, but that you can't do anything to help with the investigation. That might have been enough to silence the old man, as his jaw begins to hang agape, but you continue on to say that for an old man to try and throw the weight of his wealth around in such a way as to insult innocent people, his son might be better off in jail than under his tutelage.

It's a harsh statement to say the least, and your outburst is enough to bring Detective Walters back into the room.

“So you really don’t think that Tom Thatcher is guilty?” she asks, as she walks into a room that has fallen silent from your raging outburst. “I don’t suppose you have any evidence?”

You admit that you don’t, but that if you were a judge of character, you would think that Edward Thatcher was more likely the killer than his offspring.

“Pfft...right. I suppose it’d make you feel better if I gave the old man a quick pat down search and took him in for interrogation.”

Clearly, Detective Walters doesn’t feel the same way that you do about the situation, but just to be a prick, you say that you would actually feel **much** more comfortable if Detective Walters gave the old man a quick frisking.

What followed was the stuff of legends.

“Very well...would you please come with me, Mr. Thatcher?”

“And just why should I have to go with you? This obnoxious little shit doesn’t deserve to have his needs met! He’s withholding information and leaving my son out to dry!”

“We’ve already questioned him, Mr. Thatcher, and if you **don’t** come with me, you’ll be interfering with the investigation. Is there a reason you’re so apprehensive about joining me, sir?”

You thought it was just a coincidence at first, but the closer that Detective Walters came to Edward, the more he started to fidget in his seat, and the more that you got the impression that you weren’t safe if you were anywhere near him. You go so far as to get up and back away from the table, and your panicked reaction is enough to prompt Detective Walters to draw a pistol from the garter upon her thigh.

“Mr. Thatcher...what are you hiding?”

Dumb luck was the name of your game, but it worked entirely in your favor as the older, decrepit border collie tried not to shift in his seat again. It was too late to ward off Detective Walters, however, who kept her gun trained on his person.

He had nowhere to run, and the last, desperate efforts of an old man were perhaps his most foolish. He reached into the back of his suit and withdrew the very same knife that he used to kill Helen Flannery only minutes before, but instead of charging at the detective, he went right for you.

To that day, you still had Detective Walters to thank for your existence, and you can remember in vivid detail just how gruesome it was to watch the blood

running down the side of his body as a bullet pierced through his ribs. It was more than enough to put him on the ground, a few feet short of ending your life with the spoiled murder weapon.

The deafening **BLAM** that rang out in the dining room was enough to lure Detective Murphy back inside, and it all starts to come together for you. While you were being interrogated earlier, Edward had plenty of time to slip out of the dining room and retrieve the weapon, and with the detectives interrogating Tom and Charles only moments later, there was no way that they would have seen him in the banquet hall.

The sight of an old man, crumpled on the floor in a growing puddle of his own ichor stains and you, pressed up against the wall and shaking in panic, tells Detective Murphy the whole story. "...It couldn't be...Edward Thatcher is the killer?"

His words of disbelief echo around the dining table. No one can believe that the older gentleman was capable of such an act, but the evidence was heavily weighed against him now, seeing as he just tried to kill you with the same knife that he killed Helen with. Though it's mostly at the behest of dumb luck, you find yourself thanking your lucky stars that you stood up the owner of the hotel, and though the evening is almost certainly ruined, it's the launch pad of an entirely new chapter of your life.

Your unusual, and yet, effective skills of deduction become legends to the local police, and after a couple years of schooling and several months of training, you end up becoming a detective yourself, working alongside of Detective Murphy and Detective Walters. When you entered the Hotel Chalet so many days ago, you never would have guessed that this is what the end result would have been, but you never find yourself complaining about it.

In the aftermath of the incident, Tom Thatcher became the new owner of the Hotel Chalet, and despite the horrible incident that left the building marred, the Brookfield Gala continued to be held there, with the guest of honor from the fifth iteration, namely, **you**, returning to be the guest of honor for the sixth, so that you could finally give your speech.

You remember being so terribly nervous when it started, but this time around, no lives were lost, and naturally, Tom Thatcher welcomes you back for the seventh edition, trusting no one more than you to keep the event safe. He never speaks of his father anymore, and for reasons beyond your knowledge and understanding, Elisa no longer works on the planning committee for the Brookfield Gala.

Something inside you tells you not to question that...Tom seems rather happy with that change, and you decide that it might be for the best.

The Eighth Annual Brookfield Gala is coming up, and you're already anticipating a wonderful evening of drinks, dancing and a speech by a dignified guest of honor...this time, however, you'll be just another face in the crowd, and for once, you couldn't be happier about that.

The End

You set the glass down and rapidly shake your head. Just the whiff that you took has you slightly dizzy, and Detective Walters can see the change in your demeanor instantly. You try to keep your stomach down, but between nerves and a very nasty smelling bourbon, you're not sure that you can.

"What's the matter? Can't handle a little drink?" Detective Murphy asks, much less sympathetic than Detective Walters, but her legitimate concern for you is enough to make the former actually take a smell of your glass. His face twists up in the same disgust as your own as he looks into the bottle, unable to see anything unusual about it, but now, he knows something is up, and choosing to interrogate you in your own room is turning out to be a great fortune.

"Did you know what was in that bottle?" Detective Walters immediately asks. You reply, despite concern that you may vomit on her, that you had no idea what was in the bottle, and that you hadn't even opened it yet. Detective Murphy can verify that you're telling the truth, since he peeled away the seal on the bottle himself. "Then...someone didn't intend for you to survive this night, either."

You've dodged a couple bullets, tonight...and a knife, and a poisonous bottle of bourbon. Not daring to drink it, Detective Murphy keeps the bottle set aside for evidence, and keeps a very close eye on you, making sure that you won't react further to the tainted alcohol.

"I've got a feeling that someone intended for you to be the fall man," Detective Murphy theorizes, and Detective Walters quickly nods her agreement. "This murder was supposed to have a clear cut ending, with someone else going to jail, and you going to the pearly gates so you couldn't reveal the truth..."

The theory might not be exactly on point, but the bottle in your room is obvious no coincidence, and whatever the case, someone didn't intend for you to make it out of the evening alive. The bottle could have been placed there at any time, by

anyone with access to the room, and suddenly, you feel like there's no point in defending Tom Thatcher any longer.

Only he, his father, and the front desk manager would have had access to the room that evening. His father pleaded with you to defend the innocence of his son, and yet, you're now grasping at straws to find him anything other than guilty.

The front desk manager is still in custody in the lobby, and as you're being interrogated, he's being cleared of the murder charges. There are motives all around you, and three things continue to pry at your mind. You have to get them off of your chest to the detectives, and that's *just* what they want.

You mention to Detective Murphy that there are two things that truly stuck out to you throughout the evening, and you think each one may lead to the true identity of the killer.

To tell them about the whole conversation with Elisa, turn to page 134.

To tell them about the inscription on the knife, turn to page 139.

You think that it would be for the best to go and investigate Elisa's hotel records, but you're not sure that you can convince the detectives to let you out of the room. Even if they went with you, it would be a long shot for the stern Detective Murphy to let you out of your hotel room.

"You really think that just by finding out who she stayed with, we'll find the actual killer?"

It's about the response you expect from Detective Murphy, who has proven to be about as trusting as a gas station clerk. He hasn't said it, but you can tell that he's resisting anything that would let you out of the hotel room.

"It's as good a hunch as any that we have to work on, I suppose..."

Your ears perk right up at that. Though it isn't exactly the way you would have liked, Detective Murphy seems willing to give your idea a try.

"Detective Walters, stay here with our little informant. I'm going to go do a little extra footwork and see if the front desk manager isn't keeping those records on file."

Detective Murphy is quick to leave, and feeling just slightly more comfortable, you tap your chin in thought and try to remember if there's anything you neglected to mention to Detective Walters earlier.

Turn to page 146.

This second power outage is two too many, and you're not sure that your heart can handle the level of panic that's spreading through the banquet hall. You're sure that the detectives are going to lose control of the situation any minute, prompting you to feel much safer in your hotel room than you are where you stand.

With just one step, however, you realize the kind of mistake that you've made.

Your legs fly out from under you, akin to a cartoon character slipping on a banana, but where that might be humorous to watch, your ending is quite a bit more gruesome: you've slipped in the trickling trail of blood from Helen Flannery, and with a terribly loud **THUD**, your head slams into the floor and your own blood starts to mingle into the mess. You've got a concussion for sure,

and perhaps more, as you try and fight the urge to vomit.

When the power finally comes back on, you're the only one who tried to run away, and that's all the evidence the police need to make an arrest on you, even if you're completely innocent of the crime.

As you recover in the hospital some days later, you get the strangest sense of déjà vu, as if you already knew from a previous mistake that running from the cops wasn't going to work out so well for you.

Maybe stop trying to do that.

THE END

Thank you so much for finishing this book! Of course, if you just turned through the last few pages to get here, you got one of the bad endings anyway, and you should go back and try to find the two good endings!

If you're actually all done with the book and you've exhausted every possibility, there's good news! I've got two other books for you to enjoy, and one of them that you can actually own in a paperback!

<http://www.amazon.com/Acid-Wolf-ebook/dp/B004TAF7W8> -Link to Acid Wolf, my first full length novel. Great for tactical espionage fans. Not currently available in paperback form.

<http://www.amazon.com/Tales-Veloria-Book-Wolf-Huntress-ebook/dp/B010CFBNKS/> -Link to the first "Tales of Veloria" book, which can also be purchased at said link, or, if you'd like a hard copy, you can order one here: <http://www.lulu.com/shop/joshiah-warbaum/tales-of-veloria/paperback/product-22231164.html>

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