

OFF THE MAP (EXTRACT)

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PROLOGUE

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L'Hotel Bouchard is a delightful boutique hotel situated within the famous quarter of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The mid-priced, family-owned hotel combines comfort with sophistication. A five-star experience at a three-star price.

Comfortable beds and crisp linens, and modern amenities, such as a hair dryer and air conditioning, mean this stylish hotel will revive even the weariest traveller. Start each day with a delicious continental breakfast before exploring the city. Conveniently located close to all the top tourist sites, the hotel is the perfect Paris base. If you're looking for a Paris hotel that combines classic architecture with understated elegance, look no further than the magnificent L'Hotel Bouchard.

Nearby: The Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay, the Jardin des Tuileries.

Book here.

This could not be it.

Hana stared at the crumbling building, speechless.

This couldn't be the hotel she'd spent four months trawling the Internet to find. Not the place she'd eventually settled on, knowing with absolute certainty that it would be the perfect place for her and her four best friends to stay when they arrived in Paris, her dream city, where only a dream hotel would suffice.

What was this monstrosity before them now? This definitely wasn't the hotel she'd booked.

Four of the five girls stared at the hotel in silence. Beautiful, blonde Ada huddled up to Dina, as much for comfort as warmth against the cold. Dina pulled a beanie out of her bag and yanked it down over her long brown locks, until it covered her ears. Frankie seemed the least concerned and took some shots of herself blowing icy fog out of her mouth. Meanwhile, Mae bowed her head as she scrolled through her phone. Her pink hair shone in the early morning light,

and her Chelsea boots tapped on the sidewalk as she moved her legs to keep warm.

“This is definitely it,” said Mae.

The girls left their bags in a pile and huddled around Mae’s phone.

“That’s some serious airbrushing. It’s like the Kardashians of hotels,” Dina quipped.

Hana still refused to believe what was now obvious. “The website said it was opposite a small park.”

All five girls turned their heads in unison to see the park across the street.

“Is that man urinating on the swing set?” Ada asked, the pitch of her voice rising in horror.

Hana snatched the phone off Mae and once again fell for the delightful little hotel advertised online, with its charming facade and newly refurbished interior. She’d been in charge of organising the Paris leg of their trip and refused to stay in a hostel. Hana had been waiting her whole life to visit Paris. She wanted to do it properly. Again checking the address, Hana looked back at the street around them. They were definitely in the right place. The wrought iron sills and marble steps leading into the foyer certainly weren’t as shiny as they were in the photos. This ramshackle building must be the most photogenic hotel on the planet. The difference between the photos and the reality was astounding.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Hana was close to tears. She noticed Frankie taking a photo of her. “I’ll never speak to you again if you put this on Instagram.”

Frankie threw her head back and laughed. Nothing fazed her. She’d grown up being “worldschooled”, travelling with her parents. She rolled with the punches, so to her this was nothing but a very minor hiccup. “Hey, I’ve got to make a living, and this is gold.”

“It’s not *gold*. It’s really upsetting to me.”

Frankie shrugged. “My family once arrived at a hotel we’d booked only to find it had been demolished.”

“That would have been better than this,” Hana snarled.

“We should go inside.” Dump or not, Ada sounded relieved that they’d found their hotel. She was outside her comfort zone every step of the way on this trip. The act of travelling wasn’t easy for her. “I bet it’s lovely inside.”

“I’ll sue them for false advertising if not,” Hana said.

Dina hauled her bag towards the entrance. “C’mon, it’s cold and I need to pee.”

“Just use the swing set,” Hana snapped, lifting her bag off the pavement. “This monstrosity is hurting my eyes.”

“Then shut them,” Dina laughed.

Hana shut her mouth instead. She was furious. But still, Ada might be right. The website had shown stylish rooms with refurbished antique furniture and a view across the sixth arrondissement. It had some great reviews and was reasonably priced.

As much as she could afford to stay somewhere more expensive, she was mindful of the fact that her friends couldn’t. Apart from Frankie, who was making a mint from her Instagram account. But Ada, Mae and Dina had their budgets and Hana was sticking to one too, but that didn’t mean her dreams of a stylish Paris hotel were going to be squashed. She’d spent countless hours searching online to find the right hotel. Something chic but within budget. And L’Hotel Bouchard was meant to be it. There wasn’t a great deal about it online, but Hana had seen that as a plus. It wouldn’t be overrun by tourists. Because while she was fully aware that she was a tourist herself, that didn’t mean she wanted to be around any others. Hana was here to fulfil a dream:

Paris. And this hotel was meant to be the foundation for that.

She followed her friends into the foyer, paused, and gave the place one sweeping, melodramatic look. The others watched her, clearly taking cues from her reaction.

It was dark, with faded drapes and furnishings and the smell of damp dog. The height of the ceiling, the ornate light fittings and balustrades suggested a time of glory, but now it felt sad and claustrophobic.

“What a dump.”

“The rooms still might be better,” Dina reasoned.

“Yeah, and I might be Marie Antoinette.”

“Perhaps in a past life.” Frankie rang the bell on the front desk. “C’mon, let’s check in and if it’s really bad, we can look for something else when we go out today.”

The girls all waited silently.

Frankie hit the bell again.

Finally, a *tap, shuffle-tap* sound in the distance.

Tap-shuffle-tap.

Tap-shuffle-tap.

Until a door swung open and in walked an old woman with a walking stick. She smiled at the girls, clearly delighted to see them.

“Bonjour, Mademoiselles.”

“Bonjour, Madame. J’ai une réservation sous Hana Honda. I asked for an early check-in.”

“Oui,” the woman said. “From Australia.”

Hana watched the elderly woman carefully. She was small. Probably a head shorter than herself and Hana was only five foot four. But her presence was much larger. She was wearing a Chanel suit, which Hana picked for early seventies. Slightly worn around the cuffs, but otherwise in mint condition. Pearl earrings, black hair with one long

streak of white, all pulled into a tight bun. The slash of red across her lips bled into her wrinkles and her nose looked powdered. She had neat manicured nails, and her weathered fingers were decorated with two rings on each hand, all gold and huge sapphires.

“Is this your family hotel?” Hana asked.

“Oui. I am Bouchard. It ‘as been in my family since 1723. My grandfather made ze conversion from townhouse to ‘otel.”

“It’s a little different to how it’s depicted on TripAdvice.”

“We ‘ave both seen better days.”

Hana bit her tongue. It was true, they had, but both the hotel and owner must’ve once been something else. It was barely eight in the morning and the woman was wearing stockings. There was a fresh bouquet of flowers on the desk behind her. Hana felt guilt wash over her. Yes, they’d both seen better days, but they were both still trying. Okay, the hotel didn’t fit with the image she had in her head, but that was no reason to be rude.

Madame Bouchard slid two room keys across the desk and smiled at the girls. Her teeth were smeared with lipstick.

“Third floor. Ze elevator is broken so please use ze stairs.”

Hana pasted a tight smile across her face. “Thank you.”

And, with that, Madame Bouchard turned and tap-shuffled her way through the door and out the back.

“What, no porter?” Hana sighed.

Mae picked up her bag and started hoiking it up the stairs. She clearly wasn’t feeling jet-lagged. Dina and then Frankie followed, while Ada struggled with her bags behind them. Ada thought travel light was something you read with on a night flight. Hana made her way behind. She

felt so brutally disappointed that she could barely lift her legs.

“Sorry, Ada,” Hana apologised. “It looked completely different online.”

“It’s not your fault, sweetie.” Ada puffed. “Besides, I’m having fun.”

Hana was grateful for the lie. She knew Ada had been on-edge since she’d had a panic attack in Tokyo. She’d pulled herself together with some help from Mae, who she trusted implicitly with her ‘issues’, and decided to continue with their long-planned, post-HSC adventure. But Ada was still clearly a little shaky. Even so, watching Ada deal with this drama now made Hana realise just how far her friend had come since they’d left Australia two weeks ago. And she didn’t just mean geographically. Ada was facing her fears head-on, and Hana was impressed. Ada was made of stronger stuff than she gave herself credit for.

Hana hauled her bag to the top of the stairs and checked for the room number, counting doors down the long, dim hall as she passed them.

“This is like something from *The Shining*,” she said. “Remember that movie?”

“How could I forget? It scarred me for life,” Ada said.

“It scarred us all,” Frankie said. “Lucky we had each other.”

They came to their doors. Ada, Mae and Frankie disappeared through one, and Hana watched Dina put the key into theirs. As they entered, Hana prayed to the gods that the room was better than what they’d seen so far.

The gods were busy.

Or royally pissed off.

They certainly weren’t listening to her.

The supposedly spacious twin deluxe suite was actually

a pokey dogbox, perfect for torturing claustrophobics. The small double bed (where were the twins she'd booked?) had a sagging mattress and the carpet was frayed and stained. It was worse than disappointing. It was depressing.

"It really did look different online," Hana said weakly.

"Hey, stop saying that will you? It's pretty hideous but it's not like you designed the place." Dina knew that Hana planned to be an interior designer. It's why this leg of the trip was so important to her.

Hana believed Paris was the design capital of the world. From fashion to furniture, Paris was the leader. Hana had been waiting to come here her whole life and she wasn't going to let a little setback like a dodgy hotel ruin it.

Dina seemed to read her mind. "We can go out and get a bite to eat and check out some other hotels on the way. There's no problem moving elsewhere. If that's what you want. Do you want to find another hotel?"

Hana looked as if she'd just been handed a winning Lotto ticket. "God yes, give me one good reason to stay here."

And with that, the bathroom door swung open and out walked a guy wrapped in nothing but a towel. Tall, black hair, shoulders you could land a plane on.

Hana and Dina screamed. While the hot guy certainly seemed surprised to see them, he didn't run for cover, or yell at them. Instead he grinned.

"And I thought this hotel had no room service."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Tara is a wanderer at heart. She has lived in six countries and travelled all over, in-between. Both her sons have been Worldschooled.

Jane has published over seventy children's books, a number of plays, and seven novels. She also writes children's books under the name Jane Hinchey. Jane lives with her two sons in Sydney.

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