

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with elegant, symmetrical scrollwork and curls extending downwards on both sides.

HOTEL ORIENT

Dear Reader,

Given that many of the locations in this book are real, I'm sure you're wondering: how much of this is true?

This is a work of fiction. However, it mentions many of my favourite places in Vienna, all of which I encourage you to visit. It was informed by years of research and countless trips to the Hotel Orient, a feat made possible by the generous support of the owners.

As writer in residence, I was allowed use of the rooms as a writing space on Sundays, when the Hotel was quiet enough to hear ghosts pacing the halls. I imagine most of the clientele were in church, atoning for the sins they committed during the week, but that's mere speculation.

I've seen every room in the Hotel Orient, even the hidden ones.

But, out of respect for the historic establishment and its honoured guests, and in observance of its rules, I can neither confirm nor deny any rumours of what I witnessed inside.

Mysteriously,
Alessandra Ranelli

Eins



The first rule of the Hotel Orient was *discretion*.

It was late. The tourists had abandoned the streets, leaving their drunken footprints woven across the icy cobblestones. Only the most resilient troublemakers remained, those who could handle the cold. A deceptive hush fell over Vienna, soft as the snow. The city drifted towards carefree slumber, never dreaming that the Hotel Orient would soon break its first rule.

The love hotel lingered at the end of a shadowy street, drawing people towards its light. Over the entrance, the glowing stained-glass canopy cast muted orange and blue flames onto the snow-kissed pavement, which scattered around the reversed silhouette of the word *Orient*.

At night, the glass doors were locked. A twinkle from the chandelier glimmered through the slit of the velvet curtains, immodest as a pale ankle peeking from beneath a long hemline.

The brass doorbell gleamed, begging to be touched. Sterling was inside, awaiting the next curious passer-by brave enough to enter.

Go ahead, darling, ring the bell.

Her title was Concierge, but her real job was Keeper of Secrets, tasked to protect the private affairs of the anonymous clientele. It was dishonest work, and barely paid the bills, but Sterling adored it. After a decade of employment there, she understood the Orient's quirks. The compartment beneath the creaky floorboards in Room 18. The bullet hole in the lobby ceiling, mere inches from the chandelier's mount. The scorch marks on the window frame in Room 6, scars from a bitter husband's attempt to destroy his cheating wife's favourite suite.

The fire was back in the 1980s, well before Sterling was born. But on crisp winter evenings like this one, she swore she could smell the smoke. Though it might have been from a guest's post-coital cigarette.

The anonymous patrons were as rich, wild, and glamorous as the Hotel itself, and the Concierge knew everything about them, except their names.

And that, by morning, two of them would be dead.

Zwei



Sterling leaned against the front desk, notebook in hand, endless to-do list in mind, tracing the barrel of her fountain pen along her lower lip, leaving a faint hint of her crimson kiss on the ebonite. She scribbled a room-service order for the morning. An English stag party had booked Room 26 for the full night, and each man had adopted their favourite author's name as an alias. Sterling knew to juice a crate of oranges and arrange a silver tray with pills for their morning hangovers. The only group who could outdrink a British stag party was a book club.

The bickering couple in Room 10 had demanded oysters. There was a French chef around the corner willing to make a special delivery at this hour, but only if Sterling agreed to a date with him next week. How she suffered for her work.

She twirled the back of her pen through her curly red bob, snagging it on a streak of phthalo-blue oil paint left from yesterday's rendezvous with Anya. A side effect of dating an artist. She swiped it away before it stained her clothes.

Her uniform was a snug viridian suit dress and jacket. The blue-green hue complemented her bright auburn hair, and had become somewhat of her signature shade. A black under-bust corset cinched her waist then swooped out towards her hip, where a custom loop clasped her brass key ring and broken pocket watch. Both jingled as she paced. Though no outfit was complete without someone's gaze clinging to her.

Her skirt was tailored to reveal a precise preview of the lace at the top of her thigh-high stockings, whose back seams trailed down her legs to her Mary Jane heels. The practical shoes were comfortable

enough to stand in all evening, although they added little to her height. She was short, but not small. Her voluptuous curves offered ample flesh for eager hands to grasp, though only with her permission, darling. She was soft. If she said so herself, she looked worth touching.

True, certain German tourists might describe her as *another overweight American*. Luckily, Americans and Austrians were united in their disregard for German opinion. The locals loved her in their own gruff way. She'd been in Vienna long enough to adopt the accent, if not the personality.

Each work night, before her shift began at eleven, she stole a rose from the hall vase and tucked it behind her left ear, winking at her own reflection. Lastly, she polished her gold *Concierge & Keeper of Secrets* name tag, fogging it with a soft sigh then shining it on her skirt, before pinning it low enough on her lapel to allow guests an excuse to stare at her décolletage.

The clock read half past midnight. She crossed off yesterday's square on the calendar, which hung above a rotary phone and a Rheinmetall typewriter. It was Thursday, twelfth January. The year was anyone's guess. The Orient was beyond old-fashioned, forgoing tech gadgetry of the outside world for glitz and grandeur of long ago. Watches seemed to pause once brought inside, like the threshold held a cork in the bottle of time.

Sterling returned her attention to the list.

The scent of fresh laundry filled the tiny office. She'd proactively warmed a stack of towels for the couple in Room 21, a man with an escort whose signature move involved apricot *Marmelade* and – well, let's just say it made a mess.

The phone rang. Room 21, as expected. Sterling connected the jack to the switchboard and lifted the heavy receiver. He requested extra towels, as expected.

Anticipation was the key to seduction. Here, it was a job requirement.

Sterling poked her head out of the office and eyed the lift. Her face fell with disappointment. The orange warning light blinked over the call button. The Hotel's joints ached in winter, and this was how she called in sick. Sterling would have to climb the stairs. In heels. How she *actually* suffered for her work.

A burst of static from the bar radio drew her attention across the lobby. The antique wooden radio's glowing dial bore no numbers, and was permanently tuned to an unknown station. The announcer's crackly voice cut in: *Greetings, guys, dolls, and honoured guests, Maximilian here with the weather. Grab your swimsuits, it's gonna be a scorcher today, and what better way to cool down than with an ice-cold bottle from our sponsor, Petri Wine . . .*

Maximilian's forecasts were unreliable at best, but the records he spun never failed to fit the mood.

Keys scratched in the front lock. Fernando had arrived at last.

Bitter wind whipped the door open, billowing the curtains and sucking the bellhop inside, still grasping the handle. He clutched his purple uniform cap to his brown hair, protecting it from the gust following him. He leaned his shoulder against the door to lock it. A few snowflakes, caught on the air, floated to the ground.

'Honey, I'm home!' he said, breathless.

Sterling crossed her arms, silently demanding his excuse. Given the stray powder decorating the edges of his nostrils, he'd been in bed with another finance bro.

She sniffed. Fernando took the hint and swiped his nose. He lowered his gargantuan round plum-coloured glasses, winked, then sauntered into the office. 'I know, I know. I'm late again. What did I miss, doll?'

Sterling didn't answer. She tapped her fingers on the desk. Her index and middle nails were trimmed shorter than the rest, so the motion made a *tap, tap, click, click* sound she enjoyed. The women she dated appreciated her manicure too. For different reasons.

Her lovers marvelled at her skilled touch, never failing to compliment her on her soft hands. Had they stopped moaning for a moment and looked closer, perhaps they'd have noticed the delicate ovals of smooth skin on Sterling's fingertips. Where her prints had been carefully burned away.

The radiator hissed. Fernando clasped his hands as if begging forgiveness from both the Concierge and the Orient. 'I'm sorry, I was practising for my audition.'

He was always pursuing some new career while neglecting the one that paid him. When they'd first met, she was a college fresher, soon to be a dropout, and he was a postgraduate working in a pharmaceutical research lab. He was promptly fired for sampling the goods. Fernando was only a few years her senior, but had started university at sixteen. Like any former gifted child, he never missed a chance to mention his past as a prodigy.

In the decade-plus since they'd met, his attempted vocations included poet, therapist, even acrobat. Acting was this season's dream job. He carried a bilingual Spanish and English copy of *The Merchant of Venice* in his breast pocket, with the reverence of a soldier carrying a Bible over his heart.

'You're auditioning to play a dead body at a dinner theatre. How did that take two hours? Were you sleeping?'

'It's called method acting.'

'*Oida*,' she said, turning to hide her smile.

Oida was the most important word in the Viennese-German dialect. It meant everything from *Hey, dude!* to *For fuck's sake* to *Sweetheart, I only said your sister was sexy because she reminds me of you, you need to let it go!*

'You missed the handover,' said Sterling, pursing her lips.

He leaned on the desk, resting his chin on his interlaced fingers. 'Tell me *everything*.'

Fernando was being extra camp tonight, but it wouldn't win her over. Okay, it might, but she wouldn't admit it yet. First, she made him climb the stairs to deliver those towels to Room 21. Less punishing for him, seeing as he was in perfect shape.

After he returned, they reviewed handover notes from the afternoon Concierge, Gregor. The opera was boring, so they'd had a rush during the interval. At midnight, she'd turned away two influencers who refused to respect the photography ban. Internet celebrities were stubborn pests. Their numbers enlarged daily as their cameras shrank.

'One girl actually asked for our Wi-Fi code,' said Sterling, chuckling. 'Also, Mr K. vetoed the overnight maid they interviewed. So we'll be alone another week.'

'That's what he said *last week*,' whined Fernando.

Mr K., handsome proprietor of the Hotel Orient and the Eden Bar, was as infamous as the establishments he owned. His muscular physique made him easy to look at, but his exacting standards made him difficult to work for. The maids were the best in Europe. It was tough to find someone worthy of the position.

‘I know, *Schatzi*. But we’ll survive. By the way, housekeeping needs you to mix more stain remover,’ she said.

‘The perc. or the TCA?’

She shrugged. ‘Um, whatever they used on the chaise in the Mona Lisa Suite? Formula seven or eight?’

‘That’s Fernando’s Formula Ocho for Befouled Soft Furnishings. It uses perchloroethylene,’ he said, lowering his lashes with faux humility like he did every time he showed off his vocabulary. ‘I can prepare more, but I’ll have to wait for my paramour’s shift at the lab to procure the ingredients.’

His Shakespeare phase only encouraged him.

‘The lift took the night off, so you’ll have to help Rita climb the stairs when she gets back,’ she said.

Rita L’Amour was the Hotel’s longest-term permanent resident and Mr K.’s oldest employee. She’d worked for his father before him and still sang jazz at the Eden Bar five nights a week, well into her eighties.

Sterling cleared her throat and laid down her notes. A mischievous gleam lit her eyes. ‘Okay. Last thing. You won’t believe this’ – she stopped when the hairs on her neck stood up – ‘but it has to wait.’

She sensed it was one in the morning without checking the clock, and reached for her keys, which rattled as she strutted from office to entrance, arriving a second before the bell chimed. Sterling set her internal clock by this guest’s schedule, a woman with the alias Frau Thursday.