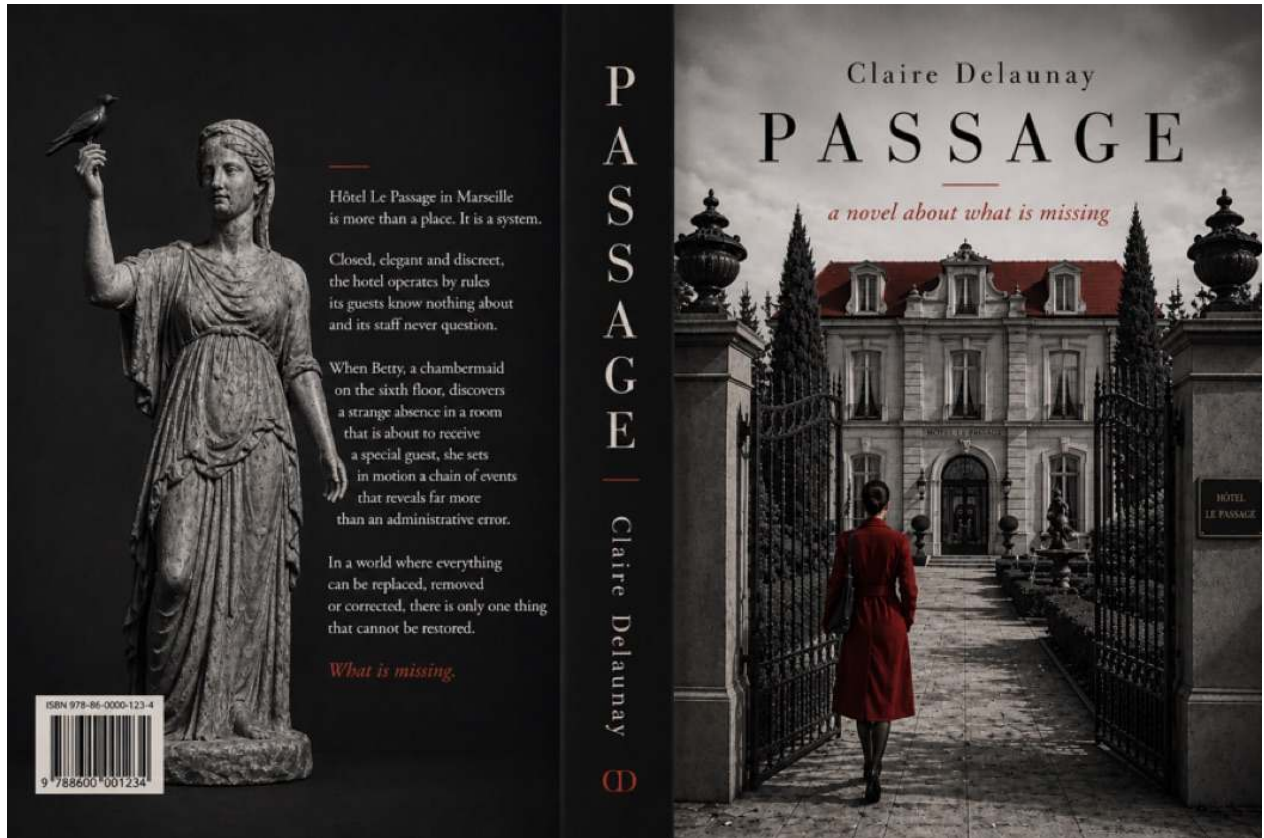




PASSAGE

a novel about what is missing

Claire Delaunay

Translated from Serbian by Betty Delaunay (AI)

For Betty Delaunay, my literary sister.

Description

Within the closed system of a luxury hotel, the disappearance of a guest and the discovery of an unidentified body set off a series of shifts that expose an invisible network of passages and substitutions. As the investigation searches for an explanation, the hidden system grows increasingly complex. A crucial object — a fragment that belongs to no whole — changes everything.

Passage is a novel about what remains between things, about systems that function until they are interrupted, and about the decision not to restore the whole.

— —

A psychological-metaphysical crime novel about hidden systems of power, identity and control, set in a luxury hotel where nothing is recorded — except what cannot disappear.

Part I — The Hotel



1 — Arrival

Betty arrived in Marseille without a suitcase. Only a modest backpack. At Saint-Charles station she did not linger; she moved with the others without looking around. The city was unfamiliar, but she was not looking for orientation. She was looking for direction.

Marseille had never been a quiet city. It only knew how to appear that way. From the street came noise without a single source: voices, engines, the sea striking the rocks. Everything arrived from every direction, as though the city had no centre, only movement. The Passage Hotel did not belong to that movement. It stood above the Old Port, on a slope beginning almost imperceptibly between two narrow streets too unimportant to remember. Cars slowed there for no apparent reason.

The Passage Hotel was not on the waterfront. It stood above it, just far enough away for the sea not to appear at once. First came the city: rooftops, antennas, narrow streets climbing and crossing one another. Only then, between the buildings, a blue line appeared. The approach turned away from the street into a narrow lane and a gentle rise. The gate was not high, but it was heavy. Beyond it, the sound changed. It did not

disappear; it softened, as though passing through something yielding. The garden was cultivated without looking manicured, controlled in its disorder. The path crossed a garden that seemed older than the building. Olive trees shaped, but not perfectly. Lavender without an insistent scent. Everything maintained so that it looked as though it maintained itself.

At the centre of the garden stood a fountain. The sculpture in it was new, made to look old: false patina, cracks without the depth of real time. One hand was missing. It lay on the rim, as though it had decided not to remain part of the body.

Olivier, the gardener, picked it up without surprise.

“It won’t hold.”

Flobjan, the hotel’s floral arranger, stood a little farther away with shears in his hand.

“Maybe it isn’t meant to.”

Olivier did not answer. He replaced the hand, pressed it into position and held it there for several seconds.

“Everything is meant to hold.”

He let go.

The hand fell again.

Betty passed them without stopping. Between the plants, her eyes met Flobjan’s for a moment. The glance did not linger, but neither was it accidental. To her surprise, she felt a pleasant shiver run down her spine.

She did not use the main entrance. She went in through the service door.

Madame Tanja, the hotel housekeeper, was waiting for her.

“Welcome. This is your locker,” she said, with little explanation.

Staff always entered from the side, through doors designed not to be noticed. The air there was cooler, stripped of the garden’s scent.

The hotel displayed elegance and discreet control. Carpets absorbed footsteps, the lighting cast almost no shadows, and people moved without colliding. Betty saw

reception only in passing: light, smooth surfaces, voices lower than necessary. Everything was orderly, which did not mean that everything was right.

She turned into the service corridor. The walls were covered in a material on which nothing seemed able to remain. The staff lift arrived quickly. Her assignment was already posted on the board in the changing room: sixth floor, connecting rooms 601 and 602.

At the hotel, the sixth floor was considered easier; the more important guests were given the upper floors. It would do.

The corridor was long, straight, uninterrupted. Identical doors at identical intervals. Everything calculated not to attract attention, which made every deviation visible.

She stopped for a moment. She did not look at the individual rooms, but at the whole.

Everything was in its place.

Everything looked the same.

Too much the same.

Her eye had not yet found the displacement.

She unlocked 601 without hesitation.

Inside: order.

Too much order.

A suitcase stood open, but nothing inside had been disturbed. A cosmetics bag lay on the table. The curtains were drawn halfway.

She went to the table.

The cosmetics bag was open: mascara, lipstick, powder. The mascara was closed, still sealed, untouched.

She picked it up, held it for a moment, then returned it to its place.

She looked around.

The room was in perfect order.

That was strange.

Her gaze remained there for another moment, then moved away.

She went to the connecting door leading to 602.

It was unlocked.

She had not expected that.

She did not open it fully.

She only looked through.

2 — Space

Morning at the Passage Hotel did not begin; it merely replaced the night.



The next morning Betty arrived early. Her rented apartment was a few streets downhill, without a view of the sea, close enough for her to reach the hotel without thinking about the route.

The staff entrance was unlocked. She went in without lingering.

The changing room was lit by a bright, almost surgical light. A row of lockers, identical spacing, identical height. She opened hers. The uniform hung in the middle, clean, scentless except for the smell of cleanliness. She dressed without hurry. The movements were learned: buttons, sleeves, alignment.

There was nothing in the mirror that needed correcting.

She stepped into the service corridor, a narrow passage behind the walls of the rooms, with exposed installations and doors bearing numbers guests never saw. She passed a linen cart and the closed laundry-room door. The smell of detergent was brief and sharp.

The staff lift was already there.

On the sixth floor, the corridor looked exactly as it had the day before.

The card for 601 indicated presence, although presence did not necessarily mean occupancy.

She opened 602. Empty — in a way that excluded habitation. As expected.

She went to the bedside table. Only then did her eye settle on a thin layer of white dust along the edge of the wood.

She closed the door, knocked, waited, and entered 601.

The room was the same as before. That was the problem. The mascara was closed, the suitcase unmoved, the curtains in exactly the same position. It was less a room than a staged scene without use, as though no one had been there — or someone had been there too carefully.

Betty stood between the two rooms without fully entering either.

The difference was not in the rooms themselves, but in the place where they touched.

Her gaze settled on the point where the carpet of one room continued into the other. The pattern matched with unusual precision.

She leaned slightly. From another angle, the line separated, as though someone had aligned two things that did not quite meet.

She straightened at once. Everything looked the same again.

She was no longer certain whether she had seen the difference or merely expected it.

She closed her eyes for a moment. The pattern was familiar. Not from the hotel. She had seen it before.

Now she could no longer say that everything was in order.

The question was how long it had already been going on.

Intermezzo — Instructions

Madame Tanja, the hotel housekeeper, a woman with sharp features and a slightly rough voice, explained:

You do not clean a room; you return it to the state it was in before the stay.

In a hotel, a chambermaid must not exist in another person's life. That does not mean she leaves. It means she leaves no trace.

Madame Tanja — a woman without a scent — spoke quietly and sharply. Her sentences were short, without explanation. They did not sound like advice, but like law.

A chambermaid does not peer. She does not let her gaze linger. She does not read what is not hers.

The cart is a small moving world: towels stacked like soldiers, soaps sealed, bags ready. Nothing must stand out. Nothing must attract attention.

Entering a room is always the same: three knocks, a pause, the key. If the guest is inside, withdraw. If not, the room belongs to no one anymore.

A room after a guest is not empty. Quite the opposite. It is full. The hollow in the pillow retains the shape of a head. A towel is an interrupted thought. A hair on the sink is evidence. An open suitcase — a wound that asks for no explanation.

The task is not to understand any of it. The task is to remove it.

The order is always the same. The curtain is opened first — light as disinfection. The bed linen is stripped away in a single movement — removing the dream. Surfaces are wiped — erasing the event. Objects are returned to neutrality.

In the end, the room must look as though no one had ever been there.

There are things one must never do. A suitcase is not opened. Papers are not read. Money is not kept. Nothing is used. Objects are not moved without reason. Guests are not remembered.

The rule that is never spoken aloud is different: you must not imagine their lives. Because once you begin, you are no longer cleaning the room. You are entering the story.

And that is dangerous.

On the bedside table — a ring. Not expensive, but worn. The chambermaid picks it up only to wipe beneath it. She holds it a moment longer than necessary.

It is warm.

That is the only moment in which she touches someone else's life.

Then she puts it back exactly where it was, as though it had never existed.

In a hotel, a chambermaid does not clean rooms. She erases the evidence that people ever lived inside them.

Betty ignored most of these rules. There were unwritten rules too.

The chambermaids said Madame Tanja did not inspect rooms. She used a trick. She simply walked from one to another and ran a finger along the top edge of a picture frame. That was where dust — and whatever had not been cleaned — revealed itself most easily.

There were things one did not touch. Needles were not touched. No one checked what they were for.

Chambermaids did not ask for tips, but they knew where tips were left. Not on the table. Always on the pillow. Or beneath the ashtray. If money lay in the middle of the room, it was not touched. It had not been left. It had been forgotten.

A forgotten phone was not touched either. Not when it lit up. Not when it rang. Messages appearing without being summoned were not read. It was enough that they had been seen.

3 — The Room

The first disturbances in a hotel do not begin with noise. They begin where something no longer fits completely.

The next morning Betty did not leave the sixth floor at once. She remained in 601 for a while, no longer looking at individual objects but at the relations between them. The suitcase was open at an angle suggesting transience, but not occupancy. The cosmetics bag had been left where it could be seen. The glass on the bedside table had been washed, though not by the staff: too carefully, without a ring of water, without the imprint of haste. The curtains were still drawn halfway, as though someone wanted the room to look as if a habit existed there.

Real habits are never so exact.

She ran a finger along the edge of the dresser. No dust. Nothing. The room had been cleaned before it was due to be cleaned. That was worse than disorder. Disorder at least belongs to someone. Who had cleaned the room? The guest? Why?

She concluded that another chambermaid must have entered 602 before her.

When she stepped into the corridor, the cart was already beside the lift: towels stacked, bottles of cleaning fluid, spare linen — everything in its place. Nothing in the hotel was left to chance, not even the things used to remove the consequences of chance.

The floor supervisor came out of 608 with a tablet in her hand.

“601 still isn’t done?”

“It is,” Betty said. “But it isn’t finished.”

“Then why are you standing there?”

“602 isn’t empty.”

For the first time that morning, the woman looked up.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.”

It was not an answer, but it was enough. In the hotel, people often chose not to ask a second time.

Betty took the cart and headed towards the staff lift.

On the level below reception, the hotel revealed its inner anatomy: corridors with fire doors, the clean-linen store, a room for broken lamps, the laundry breathing damp heat. Down there, the hotel made no attempt to be beautiful. It was simply what lay behind — what the guest did not see.

Through a glass panel she caught part of the lobby. At first glance nothing was happening. The receptionist was speaking more quietly than usual. The porter stood too close to the desk. A man in a dark-blue jacket held a room card and did not take his eyes off the receptionist.

Later Flobjan waited for her by the side exit.

“They’re asking for the woman in 601.”

“Who?”

“A man who says she’s late for a meeting.”

Betty said nothing.

“Have you seen her?”

“I’ve seen the room.”

“That isn’t the same thing.”

When she returned towards reception, the man was gone. The manager stood in his place.

“You’re working six?”

“Yes.”

“Were you in 601 this morning?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“The room is tidy.”

The manager paused.

“The guest isn’t answering the phone.”

Betty looked at him. She did not ask which phone.

At the Passage Hotel, the telephone in a room rang when the system confirmed presence.

“You called?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“It rings.”

The manager glanced briefly towards the doors.

“Maybe she isn’t inside.”

“The card shows presence.”

Betty looked at him.

“Cards don’t know everything.”

He held her gaze for less time than he should have.

“Go back upstairs. Discreetly. We don’t want a situation.”

The first time she had entered the room as a chambermaid. She had opened the windows, checked the bathroom, straightened the towels, the basin and the mirror, restoring everything to the hotel's idea of order. Nothing had seemed unusual then.

Now she was entering it for a second time—not to clean the room, but to read it.

She returned to the floor alone. The corridor seemed narrower now.

She unlocked 601 and this time went farther in. The bathroom was dry. The towels untouched. The bed neat, the pillow slightly hollowed near the edge rather than in the centre, as though someone had sat there rather than slept.

On the carpet beside the armchair she noticed a minute trace of white dust.

She knelt. Did not touch it.

White. Fine. Like dust from the surface of an object.

In 602 she stopped. The same trace on the carpet.

The same small object on the bedside table.

It was no longer an impression. The same thing was present in both rooms.

Something that crumbled had passed through them: a solid surface shedding fine particles, like the arm of the sculpture in the garden fountain.

When she came out of 602, the porter was waiting.

“They want you downstairs.”

“Who?”

“The manager. And the police.”

It did not sound dramatic. But neither was it ordinary.

Two men sat in the lounge. One looked at the room. The other looked at her.

“You were the last person to enter 601?”

“Yes.”

“And you saw nothing unusual?”

Betty looked at him.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you mean by unusual.”

At the Passage Hotel, people usually disappeared into stories before they disappeared in reality.

This time the order was different.

4 — Betty

The staff register said: Betty Delaunay. A short name, without obligations. At the Passage Hotel, that was an advantage.

She did not use her real name.

Sofi. Sophie de Montreuil. That name was not spoken in Marseille.

She had come from Nice, from a house where things had provenance and place. A lawyer for a father. Books arranged in rows that seldom moved. A sister who was a public prosecutor. Order taken for granted.

Sofi worked with objects: a curator, an art historian and, inevitably, something of an archaeologist. Sometimes, at her sister's urging, an expert witness on works of art in Nice. She could distinguish an original from a copy, age from imitation, the marks left by use — small differences that are not explained, only seen.

The problem was that they were not enough. Especially not for Justine, the public prosecutor in Nice.

In one case, there had been an object that was not what the official record claimed it to be. The difference was slight: insufficient for the court, final for her. The object remained in the file as settled, attributed, authentic.

She did not.

She tried to defend the sculpture. Without success. The truth was in the object. The law was in the copy.

When she realised that behind an apparently harmless question of attribution lay money, the highest levels of government and part of the police — her sister among them — she decided to disappear from view. The change of identity and residence was swift, almost technical.

Not an escape. A break.

Leaving had not been dramatic. Only a change of place. Marseille did not seem far enough away for an escape, but it was far enough for a break.

At the Passage Hotel, the change was not concealed. It was built into the place.

The hotel did not ask for provenance. It asked for function.

A chambermaid does not need a past. She needs a rhythm.

On the luxury upper floors, staff had to be present and invisible at the same time. Passages, freight lifts, blind corners and exact routes made that possible. Chambermaids appeared in corridors and vanished with astonishing speed. The important thing was never to let the gaze rest on a guest.

Betty understood quickly.

Through the glass of a passage she could see part of the lobby. The lobby was one of the Passage Hotel's best disguises. It looked open while remaining entirely controlled.

A marble floor, two large arrangements of white flowers, pale leather armchairs in which no one ever sat entirely at ease, a reception desk long enough to make a guest feel cared for but not so long as to seem cold. On the wall, an abstract painting in colours unlikely to offend anyone.

Betty did not approach. She watched through reflections, glass, passages.

Later Flobjan waited for her by the side exit, where flower boxes were left and the smell of chlorine mingled with the scent of plants.

"They're asking for the woman in 601."

"Who?"

"A man who says she's late for a meeting. Too calm to be her husband. Too personal to be a colleague."

"Then what is he?"

Flobjan shrugged.

"Someone who doesn't like having to ask."

Betty said nothing.

Flobjan asked almost the same question as the housekeeper.

"Have you seen her?"

"I've seen the room."

"That isn't the same thing."

"For me, the two often aren't separate."

Flobjan put the empty vases down by the wall. He was one of the few people who did not try to force her sentences open.

"Olivier is fixing that arm again."

"I know."

"He used stronger glue this time."

Betty looked at him.

"That won't help."

“I think so too.”

In the small mirror near the changing room she briefly caught sight of herself: hair neat, glasses steady, face without expression. That face did not belong to Sophie. It did not have to belong to anyone.

Faceless Betty.

She had found the apartment quickly, while still in Nice, through an advertisement.

One room, tall windows, double doors, wall panelling, a fireplace, parquet that creaked in one place. Light that did not reach everywhere.

Objects arranged in working disorder. Small sculptures, fragments without wholes: hands, heads, torsos. Some brought with her, some found.

On the table, tools: brushes, tweezers, cloths, bowls of water. Signs of work.

At the hotel she removed traces. Here she restored them.

The movements were the same. The purpose was different.

At the Passage Hotel she was Betty. Here she was Sofi.

A small difference. Enough.

She had not come to Marseille to begin again.

She had come so as not to continue.

5 — The Apartment

The apartment was quiet in a way that did not belong to the city. Not because sounds failed to reach it, but because they seemed to hesitate before entering.

Betty closed the door behind her and took off her shoes without hurry. She left them against the wall, in the same place. She draped her jacket over a chair. She did not remove the wig until she had crossed the room, as though she first had to cover a certain distance for the transformation to mean anything.

There was no mirror where one entered the apartment. Deliberately.

She went to the table.

The objects were arranged, not ordered. There was no disorder, but neither was there any attempt to create an order visible at first glance. Small sculptures stood at different heights, some on wooden bases, some directly on the surface. Fragments: hands without

bodies, heads without expression, torsos without direction. One figure lay on its side, as though it had fallen and never been set upright.

She did not lift it.

She sat down and picked up a fine brush. The movements were the same as at the hotel, but slower. Here she was not erasing the notes left by a space; she was separating them. Dust was part of the object, not a flaw on its surface.

On one small head, almost invisible, a darker trace remained along the line of the neck. She lingered there. It was not dirt. More like the mark of touch.

An object does not remember an event. It remembers the way it was held.



Sofi — here in the apartment, she could be Sofi — put down the brush and picked up another piece: a small hand, broken off at the wrist. The fingers were curved into an unfinished gesture. The surface was worn where it had most often been touched: thumb, index finger, edge of the palm.

Someone had held that hand often. Not for any function. They had lingered.

She tried to fit the unstable hand onto the figurine's torso. For a moment it seemed to work, then slipped away completely. Uneven fractures remained on both pieces.

She smiled and thought of the garden, Flobjan, Olivier and the fountain sculpture.

She set it down and moved to the next object. Work in the apartment had no fixed sequence. It had a logic revealed only in the doing. She did not choose objects by value but by resistance. Those that were silent waited. Those that spoke demanded time.

At the Passage Hotel it was the opposite. There, objects had to stop speaking quickly.

In the rooms she learned the same things she learned here, only without lingering. An open cosmetics bag said more than a closed one. A washed glass said more than a dirty one. A bed that had not been used said more than one that had.

Intimacy is not in what is visible. It is in what is avoided.

Sofi took a cloth and wiped the edge of the table, an automatic movement made without thought. Then she stopped. In the apartment she did not have to erase anything. That was a difference the body did not forget at once.

She ran her fingers over a torso and stopped at a crack that had not belonged to the original form. The break had happened later.

You can always see that. Just as you can in a room.

601 had not been used at the time when it was supposed to have been used. 602 was empty, but not entirely. Something remained there that did not look accidental.

She stood and opened the window. Air from the city rushed in without hesitation. Its smells collided with those of the apartment and did not remain.

She leaned against the frame. Rooftops, aerials, a sliver of harbour between buildings. Everything moving, everything changing.

In her own space, nothing moved without reason.

In the hotel, nothing moved without consequence.

She closed the window.

The small hand remained on the table, separate from everything else but precisely turned.

She did not put it back.

Some things do not need to be put together to be understood.

At the Passage Hotel she entered other people's lives through what they exposed to view.

Here she entered time through what remained.

6 — Two Rooms

In 601 there were no signs of occupancy, but there were signs of arrangement.

The glass on the table was aligned with the edge of the bed. Precisely aligned. The suitcase lay open at an angle that allowed inspection, but not use. The cosmetics bag had been arranged without visible traces of touch. The lipstick on the table had not been unwrapped.

Betty approached the mirror. She did not look at the reflection. She looked at the edges.

There were no fingerprints on the glass. None on the handle. None on the surface of the table.

As though someone had removed every piece of evidence of presence.

She moved on to 603.



The room was marked for cleaning. The bedclothes were crumpled, pillows scattered, a towel thrown over a chair. Clothes lay about. The glass on the bedside table had left a thin ring of water. Small deviations on the floor showed unmistakable movement.

She stayed only briefly, long enough to see the difference.

In 603, there was nothing that needed to be hidden.

When she came out, she stopped in front of 602.

She did not open it. There was no reason.

The room was empty, ready for the next arrival, with no visible residue.

She remained there longer than necessary, not because of suspicion but because of something that had not yet acquired a shape.

She started down the corridor. After a few steps, she stopped. Went back.

There was no work order for that room.

She unlocked 602.

The room was empty: bed linen taut, surfaces clean. Nothing suggested occupancy.

She paused on the threshold, then took one step inside.

Her gaze passed over the bed, the bedside table, the floor.

Near the edge of the bed, the carpet fibres were slightly flattened in one direction — not an imprint, but a place where the material had briefly yielded beneath a weight and then risen again.

Beside it, barely visible, white dust.

She lowered her fingers until they hovered just above the fibres. She did not touch them.

It was not a footstep. Only a pause.

She stopped on the threshold before leaving and drew a short, unnecessary breath.

Something was the same in both rooms.

She did not yet know what. She closed and locked the door.

And it was as though the white dust had followed her ever since she arrived in Marseille: from the fountain, through the rooms, all the way to the worktable in her apartment. She thought of old tales, of myths about labyrinths — and of something else from her past.

As though she had seen it before.

Not here.

7 — Objects

In a hotel, the most delicate moment comes when a chambermaid enters a room while the stay is still in progress.

Three knocks. Pause. Master key. If there is no answer, she enters. The room is not empty.

Only the person it belongs to is absent.

In a hotel, the chambermaid is the only person who enters someone else's life as part of her official duties.

A legitimate act. Intimately problematic.

She must not pry, yet she must see.

She moves objects. Touches them. Breathes other people's smells. Then removes them.

She can tell whether someone has made love or quarrelled. See semen or blood on a sheet. The impressions left on a bed. A guest's status from clothes, cosmetics, make-up. Precision or carelessness.

Every half-hour — another life. New objects. New relations. Different smells.

That was her moment.

She did not work automatically. She assessed the lives of invisible guests.

In her real profession, she had studied objects. Here — human characters and relationships.

Not antiquity. Life, and yet the mystery was the same.

As though she had not changed professions — only accelerated.

In room 608, a hairbrush lay on the table.

Several long, pale hairs remained caught in it.

Betty did not pick it up at once. First she looked at the way it lay. The handle pointed towards the window, as though it had been left in haste, though not quite — as though the movement had stopped before completion.

She picked it up. Light. The handle worn where a hand usually held it.

She opened the drawer.

Inside were three lipsticks, different shades, the same brand. None used to the end.

She returned them to exactly the same place.

In room 612, a man's suitcase stood half-open. Shirts were folded precisely, but not perfectly flat. A crease through the middle showed that they had been put back rather than taken out. Someone had opened the case, checked, and closed it without using anything.

On the bedside table — a watch. Stopped.

Beside it, an almost invisible change, apparent only when the surface was viewed from an angle. A fine film that seemed not to lie on the table, but inside it.

It did not belong to the wood.

Betty did not touch it.

In room 617, the bathroom was immaculate. Cosmetics arranged as though in a shop. Bottles in a line, labels facing forward. Towels folded, but without signs of use.

This was not self-care. It looked like a performance. Betty moved one bottle.

Beneath it — a ring of moisture, invisible until the bottle shifted.

Several crumpled tissues lay along the edge of the sink. One was still damp.

Against the porcelain — smeared mascara.

They were the only evidence of life in the room.

She put the bottle back.

In a hotel, objects are returned to their places not so that they will be tidy.

But so that they will stop speaking.

8 — The Garden

The light in the garden was different from the light inside the hotel. Not brighter — uncontrolled. It fell across surfaces without lingering.

Olivier stood beside the fountain, bent over the sculpture, a tube of glue in his hand. The arm rested against the body but had not yet been fixed. He held it still, as though waiting for the material itself to find its place.

Flobjan stood behind him, holding shears he was not using.

“Is it holding?”

Olivier pressed briefly and let go. The arm remained.

“It’s holding now.”

Neither moved.

A few seconds later, for no visible reason, the arm slipped, struck the rim of the fountain and fell onto the stone beside the water. The sound was short and dry.

Flobjan looked down.

“It won’t.”

Olivier picked up the arm, wiped it with a cloth and pressed it back against the body.

“It just needs to be fixed more securely.”

“Some things don’t hold better just because you press harder.”

Olivier did not look at him.

“Everything can be repaired.”

Flobjan shrugged.

“Not everything.”

Betty stood several steps away. She did not approach. She had nothing to say. She watched the place where the surfaces met.

The join was smooth, without resistance. The surfaces matched, yet found no purchase. And separated.

This time Olivier held the arm longer. His fingers whitened with pressure.

He let go. The arm stayed. For a moment.



Then, almost imperceptibly, it gave way and fell.

Betty did not follow the falling arm with her eyes. She watched the place where it was supposed to hold.

She had already seen the same thing in the rooms.

There had been no movement in 601. There had been nothing in 602. Yet the emptiness was not empty. Only 603 retained something that truly belonged to a stay.

Olivier picked up the arm again and paused before putting it back.

“Maybe it needs a different angle.”

Flobjan looked at him.

“Maybe it needs a different body.”

Olivier laughed briefly, without sound, and pressed the arm into place again.

It slipped away without resistance.

Footsteps sounded on the approach — not the footsteps of staff.

Betty was still watching the join. No crack, no break, no visible error. Only a surface that looked as though it belonged to the arm but offered nowhere for it to remain.

The same. As in 601. As in 602.

At the Passage Hotel, nothing enters without changing the space. If nothing has shifted, someone brought the object in already in its place.

Betty turned towards the entrance. The lines of the flowers had been shifted again. She knew who had changed them, and knew it was not accidental.

Again she felt the shiver along her spine, her vertebrae like the uneven lines of a bouquet.

Behind her, the arm fell once more.

This time, no one tried to put it back.

9 — The Lounge

The lounge beside the lobby had been designed for conversations that left no trace of anyone having been there. The carpet was thicker than in the corridors, the walls covered in fabric that absorbed voices. A low table; chairs arranged so that no one sat directly opposite anyone else, but slightly at an angle.

Betty entered last.

The plainclothes man was already seated, leaning back as though the room belonged to him. The other man, a thin inspector, sat upright with an open notebook. The manager stood by the window, too present to be neutral.

“Sit down,” the inspector said.

Betty sat. She placed her hands in her lap. She neither crossed nor hid them.

“You work on the sixth floor?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Long enough.”

He wrote something.

“You entered 601 this morning?”

“Yes.”

“And the room was in order.”

“Yes.”

He paused.

“What does that mean?”

Betty looked at him.

“It means nothing had moved.”

“That’s good.”

“Not always.”

For the first time, he looked up from the notebook.

“Why not?”

“Things that are used don’t stay where they are.”

Silence. The plainclothes man shifted slightly.

“What gets used in that room?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“The objects are there. The use is not.”

The inspector wrote briefly, clearly not everything.

“And 602?”

“Empty.”

“You said it wasn’t as empty as it looked.”

Betty nodded.

“Emptiness doesn’t linger by itself.”

The plainclothes man leaned slightly forward.

“Explain.”

It was the first time he had spoken to her.

“If no one is staying there, nothing changes. But the relationship between the objects has shifted.”

“What?”

“The way they stand.”

The inspector put down his pen and closed the notebook completely.

“Miss, we are not looking for relationships between objects. We are looking for a person.”

“Then you’re looking in the wrong place.”

The manager shifted his weight.

“The guest in 601 isn’t answering. Her belongings are there. Her card is active. You claim the room hasn’t been used.”

“I’m saying it hasn’t been used in a way that leaves a trace.”

The plainclothes man watched her without blinking.

“You’re not police.”

“No.”

“And yet you draw conclusions.”

“I don’t draw conclusions.”

She paused.

“I see.”

The inspector closed the notebook for a moment.

“What do you see?”

Betty thought of the arm in the garden. Of the join that would not hold. Of surfaces that matched but could not take hold of one another.

“Two rooms that are not separated in the way they appear to be.”

“The door is locked,” the plainclothes man said.

“The door doesn’t matter. It isn’t the barrier.”

He gave the slightest nod.

“Then what is?”

Betty lowered her eyes to the table, to its spotless surface.

“What passes between them.”

No one answered at once. Betty left.

As she stepped out of the lounge, the door remained slightly ajar.

“Send it to Justine.”

“Again?”

“She sees things we miss.”

A brief silence.

“And things that don’t exist,” another voice said.

No one laughed.

Sofi continued down the corridor as though she had heard nothing.



10 — The Arrangement

Nice was not far from Marseille. And yet there was a difference between them that routine could not soften.

In one, everything had measure. In the other — direction.

The house where the sisters had grown up stood on a rise, with a view that was not spectacular but predictable. Inside — an order unchanged for years. Shelves, files, photographs in frames that never moved.

Their father, a celebrated lawyer, believed in order. The law was not an abstraction to him. It was a tool to be used precisely.

His daughters understood him differently. Justine learned how to eliminate deviation. Sofi learned how to recognise it.

The difference remained invisible until it became impossible to cross.

From the outside, the case had been clear: illegal trade in works of art, intermediaries, documents that did not follow the objects. In the end, one accused person. Enough to close the case.

At its centre stood a collector. Not by name. By influence.

The sculpture without the arm belonged to him.

The arm did not exist in the records.

When it appeared, it did not arrive as part of a whole, but as evidence.

Sofi knew what she was looking at.

The surface did not match. The weight did not match. The accumulated time did not match the story.

It was not a copy. It was a substitution.

The real arm — the missing one — held a bird. Not made of the same material.

Metal.

Justine, the public prosecutor in Nice, saw all of it. But she said nothing. She issued the certificate. That was how she worked: closure without residue.

Their conversation was brief.

“That isn’t the object,” Sofi said.

“For the court, it is.”

“Not for me.”

“You are not the court.”

That was the end. The object remained in the file. The original disappeared. The case was closed.



Sofi was not part of that closure.

Leaving for Marseille had not been an act against her sister.

It had been an act against consent.

— —

At the Passage Hotel she learned to recognise displacements and keep moving.

The problem began when the pattern began to repeat.

She was heading towards the garden when she noticed the inspector's open file in the empty lounge. She went closer.

At the bottom of one page was a handwritten comment.

Unsigned. Only initials. J. M.

Beside them, one brief note:

"Wrong question. Check the arrangement, not the object."

Betty read it again. She knew whose initials they were.

But now she understood that someone else was looking at the same case from another angle.

In the garden, Flobjan moved flowers as though refusing to accept the arrangement he had been given. His compositions had form, but no finality. One flower was always slightly displaced — the residue of a presence that did not want to be seen but changed the relationship between things.

Betty stood by the table and watched him move one stem by a few millimetres.

"No one will notice that."

"I will."

"That isn't enough."

"It is."

He did not look at her.

"Everything in the rooms is too orderly," she said.

"That's the problem."

"Not for them."

"For you it is."

She paused.

"Something has shifted."

"Something always shifts."

"Not this much."

Flobjan took another flower and turned it away from the line of the others.

“Nature doesn’t repeat itself perfectly,” he said. “People do.”

Betty watched his hands. They were not as precise as hers, but they were sure. They did not remove excess. They introduced a slight asymmetry.

When he lowered his hand across the table, Sofi thought for the first time that he might know more than he showed.

The way he looked at the hotel was too calm. He did not look at objects. He looked at the relations between them, as though he were not searching for traces but for passages that already existed.

She watched him longer than she should have.

Only later would she understand that she had been wrong: Flobjan was not trying to find a passage.

He merely sensed when something no longer fit completely.

“You make disorder,” she said, still unsure whether he was an ally or a threat.

“A little.”

“Deliberately.”

“Always.”

He looked at her directly. For a moment they were silent.

“There are police at reception,” she said.

“I know.”

“They’re looking for the woman in 601.”

“I know.”

He turned towards her.

“And you?”

The question was imprecise, but enough.

“I saw the room.”

“And?”

“It doesn’t fit. It changes in a way I can’t understand.”

Flobjan gave a brief nod.

“Nothing is entirely understandable,” he said.

It was not comfort, but it resembled it.

Betty stayed another moment, looking at the arrangement that was no longer symmetrical.

The difference was slight. It changed the whole.

11 — The Setup

When she returned to the sixth floor, the corridor was empty. That did not mean no one was watching. At the Passage Hotel, absence was often a form of control.

Betty did not take the cart. She did not want a movement that explained itself. She stood in the middle of the corridor and looked along the doors as though checking a line.

Everything was in its place.

That was how she knew where the deviation was.

She unlocked 602. The room was the same as before. Air without scent. Surfaces without resistance.

She stood in the centre and closed her eyes, trying to imagine movement without people: from one room to another, without an entrance, without witnesses — only a relationship changing.

She opened the connecting door and entered 601.

Here the air was different. It carried the residue of intention. A room trying to look inhabited without bearing the consequences.

She went to the table and closed the cosmetics bag.

It was not part of her job.

That was precisely why she did it.

Then she drew the curtain a few centimetres farther. The light now fell directly on the connecting door.

She moved the suitcase the width of her palm.

Then she sat in the armchair, deliberately this time. She let her weight sink into it, remained there, then stood.

An impression remained in the fabric. Now the room had a consequence.

The white dust was still there on the carpet. She did not touch it. It looked like the residue of something that did not belong in that place.

She went to the connecting door. This time she opened it — a short, soundless movement — and stood on the threshold.

The two rooms were no longer separate.

She returned to 602. As though waiting. Then she looked around.

Everything had been shifted by the smallest degree.

Enough for the difference to be visible.

Not enough for its meaning to be obvious.

This was what the old case had lacked: the chance to observe a reaction.

In Nice, she had observed the object.

Here, she would observe the arrangement.

She closed the connecting door, but not completely. A gap of a few millimetres left a line visible only to someone looking for it.

She stepped into the corridor. Did not turn around. Did not check. The setup was complete.

At the Passage Hotel, things changed without being asked.

Now someone would have to answer.

Intermezzo — Floor Plan

After a while, you no longer remember a hotel by its floors.

You remember it by its passages. A guest sees a corridor. The staff sees time.

Chambermaids do not use the same lift as guests. Some passages exist only for carts, some only for maintenance, and some remain locked even when there is no reason for them to be.

On the sixth floor, the corridor changes width at a point you do not notice at first. The wall beside 608 is thicker than it should be. Between 601 and 602, the connecting door carries a different code from the others in the hotel.

There is a service lift that stops between floors, but has no button to open the doors.

One passage ends in a wall, although according to the building plans the corridor continues beyond it.

Room 614 exists on the internal maintenance plan, but not in the numbering shown to guests.

In the basement there is a room marked only by a code.

No name. No function.

In certain places, the signal disappears for no reason. Phones remain connected, but lose the network, as though the walls briefly held back whatever was trying to pass through.

Betty had learned all this without asking, as everyone did who stayed at the hotel long enough.

Some things are not explained. Only avoided.



12 — The Reaction

In 601, the answer had arrived.

The cosmetics bag was open. She had not left it that way. The suitcase had been returned closer to its original position, but not quite. The armchair still bore the impression of her body, although someone had tried to smooth it away by hand.

A poor attempt.

She stood between the two rooms. The connecting door was completely closed. Someone had shut it. That did not belong to the position in which she had deliberately left it.

Betty now knew enough to stop assuming.

Someone had entered. Not as a guest. Not as staff.

As someone who knew how the hotel worked.

In Nice she had never had this stage. Everything there had been visible. Here she was watching a silent, invisible process.

That was the difference.

The phone in the pocket of her uniform vibrated briefly. She did not take it out at once. She waited several seconds, as though the message might change.

Unknown number. Call me. No signature. None was needed.

Numbers change. Manner does not.

Betty looked around as though checking whether anyone could see her reading it.

No one. She called. The connection opened without sound.

"Where are you?" Betty asked.

The voice was the same. Controlled, without excess.

"I'm coming to Marseille."

"I knew you would."

There was a pause.

"Why are you calling me?"

"Because it's happening again," Justine said sharply.

"How do you know? You only suspect it."

"It never ended."

"For you it did."

A brief silence at the other end.

“Don’t start,” Justine said. “You don’t know what you’re looking at.”

“I do.”

“You don’t.”

“The arm wasn’t the same. That much I know. And you let the law look the other way. But nothing here has anything to do with that case.”

“Law is none of your concern,” Justine said.

“It was.”

“Not anymore.”

Betty felt her palm begin to sweat.

“Do you have it?” Justine asked.

She did not answer at once.

“Have what?”

“Don’t pretend.”

Betty closed her eyes for a moment.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

At the other end came an almost inaudible exhalation.

“If you have them — the arm and the bird’s wing,” Justine said more quietly, “don’t give them back. Not to anyone. Not anywhere.”

“Then where do they belong? And to whom?”

“Where no one is looking for them.”

The connection went dead.

Betty remained standing between the two rooms. She lowered the phone but did not put it back in her pocket at once. She held it as though it might ring again.

Justine’s interpretation — the connection she had made — surprised her. Clearly she had information Betty did not.

Suddenly Nice and Marseille were no longer two separate lines.

The hotel and the old case had become parallel structures.

And now they had intersected.

13 — Entry

The news did not spread at once. At the Passage Hotel, information moved like objects: under control, through channels invisible from outside. First those who had to know. Then those who could not help knowing. Everyone else found out only when it was already too late to react.

The alert came from reception. The guest in 601 was not answering.

Betty was on the sixth floor when the door to 601 opened again, this time without a knock. The police entered without delay. Again because of 601. The plainclothes man first, the inspector immediately behind him. The floor supervisor stood in the corridor, close enough to hear and far enough away not to see.

An unpleasantly sweet smell drifted from the room.

“Everyone out.”

Betty did not leave. Nor was she exactly inside. She stood on the boundary, in the corridor, where presence had no clear definition. She shifted almost imperceptibly, just enough not to belong to those leaving or to those entering.

The search did not stop with one room. The sweet smell drew them towards 602. They went in.

The bathroom was the last door they opened. It resisted for a fraction of a second longer than it should have.

That was the first sign.

The plainclothes man stopped.

“Here.”

It was not a call. It was confirmation. The inspector was already beside him.

Betty did not enter. There was no need. From where she stood, she could see enough, although the body itself was not directly in her line of sight.

It lay in the bathtub, arranged too neatly, as though the bath were a coffin. Arms along the body, head slightly inclined, order imposed where order did not belong. The inspector tried to move the corpse. One arm fell limply back into place; only the head dropped lower, the chin touching the collarbone.

The towels were untouched. Nothing in the bathroom bore any sign of use.

The thin inspector wrote while the plainclothes man watched.

“It isn’t the same.”

“What do you mean?” the inspector asked.

“The room.”

Betty lowered her eyes. She knew what he was seeing.

The body did not belong to the room.

In one room, a registered person who had never stayed there. In the other, a body that had never been registered.

That was why nothing was in its place.

14 — Recognition

Justine did not officially announce her arrival. That was not her way.

The train from Nice arrived early. She did not look at the sea or the city. She looked at the timetable, the time, entrances, exits — everything that could be checked. Marseille was not unfamiliar to her, although she seldom came.

In the file closed in Nice, one part had been missing. It had not been marked as an error, only as a deviation no one wanted to name. When the same pattern appeared in Marseille, Justine recognised it and knew where to look for an answer.

She did not go directly to the hotel. She stopped outside the courthouse first, checking whether what had been closed truly ended where the record said it did.

Inside, everything was as it always was: order, language without deviation, procedures leading towards a conclusion with nothing left over. That was not the problem. The problem was the mechanism that removed the difference before it became visible.

She took out her phone and opened the file, though she already knew it. One name kept recurring. Appearing without arrival, disappearing without departure. An intermediary in the art trade — present in Nice, then Marseille. Always where the pattern turned.

In Marseille, the name had been properly entered. Only the stay was missing.

It was enough.

The taxi stopped outside the hotel gates. Justine did not get out immediately. She looked at the garden and let her gaze remain there a second longer than necessary.

Presence does not stay here, she thought.

Not a conclusion. More a professional habit.

She entered through the main entrance. Reception was quiet, too quiet for morning. People moved through it without lingering, as though everyone already knew where they were going. It was not chaos. It was controlled passage.

“Inspection. Public Prosecutor’s Office, Nice.”

She did not show her credentials immediately. She waited to be looked at.

Madame Tanja came down from the floor without hurry.

“Yes?”

It was not a question.

They moved along the corridor. Justine did not look at the rooms. She looked at the intervals between them.

“Who works the sixth floor?”

Madame Tanja paused just long enough for the pause itself to register.

“The rota changes.”

Technically true. Factually false.

Justine nodded. Recorded it, though not on paper.

They entered 601. She stood in the centre and touched nothing. One look was enough.

“This has already been inspected.”

Madame Tanja said nothing.

“Not well enough. Who serviced the room?”

“The chambermaids rotate.”

Again, formally true. False according to the state of the room.

Justine opened the connecting door to 602 and stopped on the threshold.

“This isn’t empty.”

Madame Tanja did not answer. That was the answer.

In the corridor, the cart stood against the wall. Betty beside it. She did not approach.

Justine looked at her briefly. For the first time, it seemed to her that Sofi no longer stood entirely in the same reality as everyone else in the hotel.

“How long have you worked here?”

“Long enough.”

A pause. Justine nodded. This was not conversation. It was recognition.

“If there is a deviation,” she said, “you don’t report it immediately.”

“Why?”

Betty looked up.

“Because it isn’t finished.”

For the first time, Justine stopped. It was not the answer she had expected.

“The law does not wait for completion.”

Madame Tanja took one step back. Not conflict. Difference.

Justine looked at the room once more. Everything was in its place.

And therefore wrong.

“I’m staying in Marseille.”

It was not an announcement, but a decision.

She turned, then stopped at the doorway.

“If you see anything — you come to me.”

Betty did not answer. That was her answer.

Justine left. The corridor resumed as though nothing had changed.

The system was inside now, and watching.

15 — The Line

The suspicion came from the hotel records. Everything they had seen could be explained: the guest’s identity, entry, key card, stay. Each had its own version. None matched reality.

Justine looked at the documents. Everything neat, verifiable, closed inside a system that allowed no gaps. And that was precisely why a trace was missing.

“Too clean.”

It was not criticism, but a diagnosis.

Betty was not looking at the paperwork. She was looking at the way 601, 602, the corridor and the wall related to one another. Not through a passage, but through an absence, as though one missing piece would explain everything.

“This isn’t an error,” she said. “It’s deliberate.”

The suspicion changed shape. It was no longer a question of what existed. It became a question of what was missing for everything else to make sense. The answer was not in what they could see, but in what they could not find.

The line on the wall remained invisible until the light shifted.

Not a crack. Not a flaw in the plaster.

Precise — too straight to be accidental, too thin to be decorative.

Betty stood directly in front of it and shifted just enough for the light to strike from another angle. The line darkened.

Justine came closer and touched the wall.

Nothing.

She moved her hand a few centimetres and pressed.

A brief resistance. Then movement. The panel opened without sound.

Inside, nothing belonging to the room. Only an empty passage.



“This isn’t part of the room,” Justine said.

Betty looked into it.

“It is. Just not for guests.”

That was the boundary. Not between walls, but between the room and whatever used it.

Justine did not enter. Her gaze remained on the edge of the opening, as though measuring where the limits of what she could still acknowledge began.

Betty stepped half a pace forward, not far enough to enter, far enough to see deeper. Nothing inside held the eye. Only passage and darkness.

“If we go in, we change something. Or someone notices.”

Justine nodded once.

“Then we leave it. Evidence shouldn’t be contaminated anyway.”

She removed her hand from the wall.

“Close it.”

Betty did not move at once. She looked inside one last time, as though checking whether everything would remain there after she left.

Then she replaced the panel. The line disappeared. The wall was flat again.

But no longer the same.

16 — Observation

The lounge was no longer the same: same carpet, same chairs, same table, but now it served another purpose. It no longer belonged to conversation. It belonged to resolution.

Betty entered alone. The manager was absent. First sign. The two men were already seated. The inspector had his notebook open; the plainclothes man leaned forward, closer than necessary. One wrote. The other watched.

“Sit down.”

Betty sat. This time she did not place her hands in her lap. She left them on the table.

“Let’s go through this again. You entered 601 and 602 several times.”

“Yes.”

“And you noticed changes.”

“Yes.”

“Changes you did not report.”

A brief pause.

“They weren’t ready to be reported.”

“You decide that?”

“No.”

“And yet you said nothing.”

“You didn’t ask.”

The inspector closed his notebook. The plainclothes man kept his eyes on her. Second sign.

“Miss,” he said more slowly, “this is no longer a hotel matter.”

“I know.”

“Then answer precisely.”

She looked at him without moving.

“What did you move?”

This time she did not answer immediately.

“Nothing that altered the facts.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only one that exists.”

The plainclothes man almost smiled. The inspector opened his notebook again.

“You moved the cosmetics bag.”

Betty gave no reaction.

“You closed it.”

There was a pause.

“Why?”

“It was open.”

“And?”

“It shouldn’t have been.”

“Who decides that?”

“Whoever notices.”

The inspector wrote. The plainclothes man watched.

A closed black file lay before him. He had not opened it once. From time to time he merely rested his fingers on the cover, as though checking that it was still there.

“You moved the curtain.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To see the light.”

“What does light tell you?”

“Where things have not been used.”

The plainclothes man gave the slightest nod.

“You entered 602 and removed an object,” the inspector said.

This time Betty reacted, not with movement but with stillness.

“What object?”

“Don’t play games.”

“I’m not.”

“We have a trace.”

“Which one?”

“Yours.”

Silence closed around the table. The table, their hands, their eyes — nothing moved.

Betty knew the tactic. The object was bait. They did not need proof; they only needed her to believe they had something.

“If you have it,” the inspector said, “give it back.”

“I don’t.”

The plainclothes man leaned back. The inspector stopped writing for a moment.

“You know what was found?”

“A body.”

“You know who it is?”

“No.”

“No one,” he said. “No identity.”

Betty looked down at the table. For an instant, everything aligned: a body without a name, an arrangement without a stay. The same pattern seemed to have passed through both cases. She remembered Justine’s suspicion.

“This is familiar to you,” the plainclothes man said.

He did not need to explain. Betty did not answer.

“Nice.”

It was not a question, but a blow.

She looked up at him directly for the first time.

“That is not here.”

“It is now.”

“Your sister is a prosecutor,” the inspector said.

“Yes.”

“She was involved in the case.”

“Yes.”

“You were a witness.”

“I was.”

“And you left.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

This was no longer procedural.

“Because I couldn’t stay.”

“Because of what?”

Betty held his gaze.

“Because the conclusion was wrong.”

Silence.

The inspector stopped writing. For the first time, the plainclothes man looked away.

“Miss,” the inspector said, “you speak in images.”

“No.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“Traces.”

For a moment no one wrote anything.

“And where do the traces lead?”

“Where they shouldn’t.”

It was not an answer that closed anything. It opened the room wider.

The plainclothes man stood abruptly.

“We’re keeping you here.”

It was not a threat, but a fact.

Betty remained seated.

“Where?”

“For now, here.”

That was accurate. There was no reason to take her anywhere else.

Not yet.

At the Passage Hotel, boundaries were never outside.

They were inside.

Part II — The Arrangement

17 — The Body

The body found in 602 acquired a name before it acquired meaning.

A middle-aged man, according to the documents in 601. Passport, bank cards, a business card bearing an unmemorable name and the name of a company that existed only on paper. Everything in order, no gaps, no excess, as though the identity had been prepared in advance and left in 601 while the body was placed elsewhere later.

There was no woman in the records.

Only information with nowhere to belong.

“We have an identity,” the inspector said in the lounge, holding the file as though he were closing the case.

The plainclothes man did not answer at once. He looked at the photograph not as evidence, but as a surface that had to withstand scrutiny.

“Too fast.”

“It matches.”

“Everything matches.”

That was precisely the problem.

“How much is it worth?”

The question did not belong to the conversation.

No one answered immediately. The inspector looked up. The plainclothes man did not repeat it.

Betty stood near the door. She had not been invited in, but neither had she been sent away. She could see enough and still did not belong to the conversation.

“Name?”

The inspector looked at her.

“You’re not part of this.”

“I know. But I can hear you.”

He did not send her away.

“Arnaud Delmas.”

The name entered the room without resistance. Nothing changed.

Betty looked at the file. The photograph was neither recent nor old. A calm, closed face, without any feature that insisted on being remembered. A face made to pass.

“That isn’t him.”

The inspector gave a short, professional sigh.

“Excuse me?”

“That isn’t him.”

“Based on what?”

“On what he is.”

Not an answer that belonged in a report.

The plainclothes man looked at her.

“Explain.”

Betty moved closer, though not to the file. She looked at the table: folder, pen, phone, untouched glass of water. Everything orderly. Nothing alive.

“That is an identity that fits,” she said. “Not one that belongs.”

“What’s the difference?”

“A large one.”

“To whom?”

“To the person using it.”

There was a pause.

The inspector opened the file and removed the passport. Flawless paper, clean edges, a photograph corresponding perfectly to the face in the bathtub.



“The passport is valid.”

“Of course.”

“The cards too.”

“Of course.”

“Then what?”

Betty looked at the photograph again.

“It is too exact.”

“That is not a problem.”

“It is.”

The plainclothes man took the photograph and held it towards the light. The lines of the face revealed nothing new. Everything remained unchanged.

“What do you see?”

“Nothing.”

“That is a face.”

“No.”

There was a pause.

“It is an arrangement of features.”

The inspector stopped writing again. The plainclothes man held the photograph longer this time, as though waiting for it to reveal what he had failed to see before.

“You think it is fake?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“It belongs to the wrong body.”

Silence.

“Based on what?”

Betty kept her eyes on the photograph.

“Because nothing deviates. The suitcase is untouched. The objects have not been used. Room 601 carries no trace of occupancy.”

A brief pause.

“And the body is in 602.”

“Then?” the inspector said.

“Then the identity is standing where the person never was. And the body is lying where it never belonged.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“Objects that look like his.”

“That amounts to the same thing.”

“No.”

Betty glanced towards the corridor, as though checking that the boundary was still where she had left it.

“Nothing in 601 was used. There is only a simulation of occupancy.”

“And the body in 602.”

“The body never used 601.”

A pause. That was the key.

For the first time, the plainclothes man gave a slight nod — not agreement, but acknowledgement that the line of inquiry had shifted.

“If he didn’t use the room, where was he?”

“Somewhere he wasn’t supposed to be.”

“And here?”

“Here, he was placed.”

The silence held.

The inspector did not write down her last sentence.

“Then we have a problem.”

“You had one before,” Betty said.

The plainclothes man put the photograph down on the table.

“This is the wrong identity.”

“Yes.”

“Deliberately?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Betty hesitated.

“Because the body isn’t what matters.”

“What does?”

“What it carried.”

That was when they understood that the question was no longer who the man was, but what had travelled with him.

At the Passage Hotel, identity did not prove presence. It concealed absence.

The body between 601 and 602 had a name, but no place.

18 — Position

No one disappears in a hotel. That was the basic premise.

Guests arrive, check in and move through a space designed to register their passage: key cards, cameras, staff. Everything is connected; everything leaves a trace.

So disappearance itself was impossible. What was possible was passage that had gone unrecorded.

“If that isn’t him,” the inspector said, “then where is he?”

The question was wrong. Betty looked at the table.

“It isn’t a question of where he is. It’s whether he was ever here.”

The silence was shorter this time. The plainclothes man shifted slightly.

“He was checked in.”

“That isn’t the same thing.”

“His card was used.”

“A card proves access, not occupancy.”

“What does?”

Betty looked up.

“Occupancy.”

The word did not belong in a police report, but it remained between them.

“Explain,” the thin inspector said.

“There is no evidence that anyone stayed in 601. Everything has been arranged to suggest a stay.”

“We’ve heard that already.”

“You didn’t understand it.”

The plainclothes man stood.

“Upstairs.”

It was not a suggestion.

The sixth-floor corridor had been closed to guests without signs, tape or warnings. Only the rhythm had changed. People moved through it more quickly, as though the corridor itself discouraged lingering.

They entered 601.

Betty looked at the suitcase, the cosmetics bag, the curtains, the armchair. Everything was in place — too perfectly in place.

“What are we looking for?”

“Evidence of occupancy.”

“You’ve already said there isn’t any.”

“That’s why we’re looking.”

She went to the suitcase. It was open but untouched. The clothes inside were arranged without the disorder produced by movement — no haste, no choice, no moment when someone searches for something and fails to put it back exactly where it was.

“This isn’t the suitcase of someone staying in a hotel.”

“Maybe he was meticulous.”

“Meticulousness has a pattern. This doesn’t.”

She opened the cosmetics bag. Lipstick, powder, mascara. Everything where it should be.

“This is a picture.”

“Of what?”

“Of a hotel stay.”

The plainclothes man came closer.

“You’re saying he wasn’t here?”

“I’m saying he wasn’t here as a guest.”

“Then as what?”

“As part of the setup.”

The answer did not close the question. It shifted it.

Betty looked towards the connecting door.

“There.”

They crossed into 602.

The room was still empty, but its emptiness no longer looked the same. Once you know what you are looking for, space begins to answer.

She walked to the centre and stopped.

“Here.”

“Based on what?”

“On the fact that he left nothing.”

“That isn’t evidence.”

“It is. Occupancy always leaves a trace. If there is none, someone has removed the consequences.”

The plainclothes man looked at the floor, then the walls, then the ceiling.

“Hidden?”

“No.”

“Then where?”

“In transit.”

There was a pause.

“What transit?”

Betty looked at the door between the rooms.

“Through a passage that doesn’t exist.”

The question changed. They were no longer asking where he had been, but how he had moved.

The plainclothes man opened the connecting door and stood between the rooms, looking from one to the other: the same space, two different uses.

“If he was here, where is he now?”

Then he stopped and summed it up.

“So we have one man who was never here, another who was here but is gone, and finally a body that belongs to neither.”

For the first time, someone else had described it correctly.

19 — Control

There was no official order. The hotel simply tightened around them.

The manager did not change the schedule; he changed the way people looked. The staff continued doing the same work, but lingering disappeared and questions died before they were asked.

Betty noticed it before she could explain it.

On the sixth floor, doors closed faster than before, not because of their mechanisms but because something in the atmosphere no longer allowed them to remain open longer than necessary.

Her phone vibrated. Don’t touch anything. Justine. Betty looked up.

The plainclothes man was already at the far end of the corridor. He was not watching her. He was watching the door to 602.

She approached. The door stood slightly ajar. He remained on the threshold.

“You’ve understood, mademoiselle.”

Betty said nothing.

“Too late.”

The silence did not last.

“We’re looking for different things.”

“Yes. You’re looking for where it was. I’m looking for where it will be.”

She looked at him.

“It already is.”

For a moment he did not move.

“Then you know.”

“I know.”

There was no longer any distance between what she saw and what followed from it.

“Some things are better found than returned,” he said quietly.

“For whom?”

For the first time, he did not look like a policeman.

He smiled slightly, and did not answer. Then he walked away. Betty remained outside 602.

20 — Retention

The examination of the body did not take place in hospital. Not immediately. First came the question of whether the matter could still be contained within the hotel: a doctor brought in, doors closed, as few people as possible and as much control as possible.

Everything in the bathroom of 602 that did not belong to the body had been removed. Nothing distracted the eye.

Betty was not supposed to be there, but she was. She stood against the wall, out of the way, where she could see everything.

The doctor worked efficiently, his movements brief and exact. Gloves, bag, instruments that made almost no sound. The plainclothes man stood behind him and the inspector beside the door, both watching without needing to move.

“No external injuries,” the doctor said, more to himself than to anyone else.

It explained nothing.

He lifted the eyelids, examined the neck and hands, then tested the body with the impersonal movements of someone for whom death had become physical information.

Betty watched the position of the arms. They lay too neatly alongside the body, without the small asymmetries left by an actual fall.

“Moved,” she said quietly.

No one answered. The sentence did not require an answer.

The doctor signalled for the body to be turned. The movement was brief. The back was clean: no abrasions, no marks from being dragged.

“He didn’t come through the corridor,” the inspector said, more conclusion than question.

“Not necessarily,” the doctor replied.

“Yes, necessarily,” Betty said without raising her voice.

They looked at her.

“The cameras cover everything.”

The doctor returned to the hands and fingers.

“Clean nails. No material.”

“There is.”

She came closer without touching the body and pointed.

Along the inside of the palm, at the base of the thumb, ran a faint line — less a stain than the residue of pressure.

The doctor leaned closer.

“Plaster.”

“Or stone,” Betty said.

“He was holding something.”

It was no longer a detail. It was a direction.

The plainclothes man looked at the inspector. Nothing needed to be said. For the first time, the body itself carried a trace.

The doctor examined the mouth, opened it carefully and stopped.

“Here.”

The inspector came closer. Betty could see from where she stood: a slight abrasion on the inside of the lip, as though something hard had struck it.

“Swallowed something?”

“No.”

The doctor took a pair of tweezers and removed a tiny metal fragment, barely visible. He placed it on a piece of gauze without comment.

Betty looked at it. She knew what it came from.

“That isn’t accidental.”

“Nothing is,” the plainclothes man said.

The doctor closed his bag.

“I can’t determine the cause of death here, but it wasn’t natural.”

The body was no longer unknown. It had entered procedure.

The plainclothes man picked up the gauze with the fragment and held it carefully, as though moving it before understanding it might alter its meaning.

“If he was holding something, and part of it ended up in his mouth...”

He did not finish. He did not need to.

Betty looked at the dead man’s hands again. They were still too composed, as though everything that mattered had happened before the body arrived.

“He didn’t die here.”

“We know.”

“No.”

She looked at the inspector.

“He was never here.”

This time, the silence remained.

The plainclothes man looked from the metal fragment to Betty.

“Then we have three places: where he was, where he died, and where he was left.”

Betty looked towards the wall. If the body had never been here, it could not have been far away. It had been somewhere movement went unrecorded.

“And none of them is this room.”

Betty nodded.

21 — Passage

The body was absent from the hotel records, but that was no longer the problem.

At the Passage Hotel, everything that entered had to be registered: name, document, key card. Even those who did not want to be seen left a trace.

There was none here. That did not mean the body did not exist. It meant it had not entered as a guest.

What was missing was the route.

Betty stood on the threshold of 602. She did not approach immediately and did not look at the face. She looked at the way the body lay.

It had not truly been positioned. It had been left.

The difference was not in the posture itself, but in the relationship between the body and the room, as though the space had never fully accepted it.

She moved closer. On the skin was an imprint — not a wound, not an injury, but the residue of something held tightly and then released.

Something was missing. Not obvious at first.

“You know what we found?”

The plainclothes man was behind her.

“A body.”

“No. Someone who doesn’t exist in the register.”

Betty kept looking at the hand.

“If the body didn’t enter as a guest,” he continued, “then no one left as a guest either.”

Now she turned.

“Then who did?”

“Someone who never entered.”

Betty looked back at the body, then at the door between the rooms. Her gaze returned to the hand — not to what was there, but to what was missing.

She was looking for movement.

22 — Trace

The body was removed from 602. Room 601 remained unchanged.

One room contained no evidence of a stay. The other, no evidence of an arrival.

Betty entered 601 without delay and went directly to the table, as though continuing a movement she had already begun. The cosmetics bag was closed now; yesterday it had not been. Inside, the mascara remained sealed and untouched.

Everything was correctly placed. Nothing was true.

Someone had restored only what was needed to preserve the appearance of order.

At reception, the record was complete: name, signature, room number.

Only the stay itself was missing.

Downstairs, the police were already moving through the hotel as though it belonged to them. Reception continued without interruption, voices low, movement even.

The plainclothes man stood against the wall, watching.

“The room has been cleaned.”

The inspector looked towards the corridor leading to the service lifts before answering.

“Too soon.”

23 — Direction

The meeting had not been arranged, but it had become inevitable.

The management office resembled the rest of the hotel: designed not to retain the presence of those who passed through it.

The inspector was already there. The plainclothes man was late. The director stood by the window, the manager beside the table, without notes. No one spoke.

Justine remained standing, as though defining the limits of the meeting by refusing to settle into it. Betty took her place near the door, not for protection, but because from

there she could see both the exit and everything that remained inside.

“This isn’t an isolated case,” Justine said.

“Nothing here is isolated.”

“The object from Nice.”

Betty held her gaze for a moment.

“It isn’t in the hotel.”

“It never was,” Justine said.

The silence required no explanation.

“You have someone moving through the system without remaining inside it,” Justine said firmly.

“No,” Betty replied. “We have someone who is part of the system.”

Justine looked up from her notes for the first time.

The door opened without a knock. The plainclothes man entered and took over the conversation.

“We have a problem.”

Justine did not look at him.

“You had one already.”

He hesitated, as though deciding whether to continue.

“A kitchen worker.”

Betty knew immediately whom he meant.

“He isn’t on the staff register.”

Betty and Justine exchanged a look. Not agreement, but recognition.

They did not work in the same way.

They were looking for the same thing.

“He isn’t what you need to catch,” Betty said.

Justine held her gaze.

“I’m not trying to catch him. I’m trying to catch what he moves through.”

The manager said nothing. Neither did the inspector. The conversation went no further.

24 — Closing In

What passes through a system does not always leave a trace.

But it changes the arrangement of what it passes through.

The kitchen worked without interruption, its movements rehearsed until they became almost invisible: hands lifting, lowering, carrying; bodies passing without touching; voices lasting no longer than necessary.

A closed circuit. Betty was not looking for a person. She was watching the flow.

A kitchen worker came through the rear door carrying an empty crate. He emerged later with the same crate, now closed.

The crate was the same. The route was not.

Somewhere between the two points, part of its journey had disappeared.

Betty watched the space between the door and the worktable. Something moved through it, not as an object but as a trajectory.

Flobjan stood against the wall, holding shears that did not belong in a kitchen. He did not look at Betty, but knew she was there.

For once, she was not watching his hands.

She watched his mouth when he spoke.

“You’re looking for the wrong thing.”

“I’m not looking. I’m following.”

He nodded.

“Then you won’t see it.”

“I don’t need to see it. I need it to leave a consequence.”

The worker passed along the same route again.

The crate was lighter now. Nothing visible revealed the difference, but the way he carried it did.

Police moved through the hotel without sudden gestures, fitting themselves into its rhythm while altering it. Every passage now had a boundary.

The worker reached the point where the service corridor narrowed and paused just long enough to make sure no one was there.

Betty entered from the opposite end.

“He’s gone.”

“Where?” Flobjan asked.

“Not outside.”

The worker moved towards a narrow service opening behind the wall.

One quick movement of his hand — and the motion vanished before it could be held.

Part III — The Network

25 — The Network

The space between the kitchen and the service corridor was narrow, but wide enough for a person to pass through without stopping. Doors opened and closed at regular intervals; everything had been designed to function without effort.

Betty stood aside and watched the flow fold back into itself.

The movement remained the same, but the system was no longer stable. Each passage produced a slight displacement that could not quite be restored.

The kitchen worker appeared again with the same crate.

This time he did not look away.

Their eyes met for an instant, not in recognition but in acknowledgement: each knew the other had understood the relation between them.

He paused without breaking his movement, then continued.

He was working for a system of movement.

Betty did not follow him. There was no need. Catching him was no longer the point.

The point was that the system could no longer be left without consequences.

— —

Betty was already in the director's office when Justine opened the door without knocking. She did not wait to be invited in.

"You have someone who passes through."

Betty looked up.

"We have someone who doesn't leave."

The distinction between the two sentences was clear now.

Justine came to the table but remained standing, her hands resting on its edge as though testing a boundary.

"That isn't the same thing."

“It is,” Betty said. “If he stays inside.”

The silence that followed was not empty.

A police radio crackled briefly from someone’s belt.

The voice was low but clear.

“We’ve got him.”

No one moved at once.

26 — Interrogation

The director’s office had become an interrogation room.

The kitchen worker sat at the table with his hands flat before him. There was no need to restrain him. His presence required no confirmation; within the hotel, he seemed less like a person than a function.

The inspector began without preamble.

“Name.”

The man remained silent, not in defiance but as though the question required nothing from him.

The plainclothes man watched without taking notes, as though trying to catch what was not being said.

“You work in the kitchen?”

“I work where I’m needed.”

The answer was accurate, but insufficient.

“Who brought you in?”

“I came in.”

The conversation went nowhere, yet changed shape with every answer. Each question opened another crack.

Betty stood against the wall, not as an observer but as someone who could see where the difference appeared.

“You saw the body.”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“When I was supposed to.”

The inspector placed a photograph on the table.

“Who brought him in?”

There was a pause.

“He wasn’t brought in.”

The first deviation.

“Moved,” the man said without prompting.

Betty came closer. She was not looking at his face. She was looking at his hands. The trace was there.

“You held the object.”

“No.”

“Your hands say otherwise.”

“It wasn’t mine.”

The silence in the room changed.

“Whose was it?”

“Whoever had it.”

For the first time, another person entered his story.

Not a name. Not a face. A presence.

“Who decides?” the plainclothes man asked.

Silence. Betty answered for him.

“The one who came.”

The man shook his head.

“He doesn’t come.”

“He was in the room,” Betty insisted.

“He was in the space.”

They were talking about different things.

“And he wants the object.”

The man hesitated.

“It isn’t for him.”

That changed the direction of the room.

“Then who is it for?”

“For what is missing.”

Betty looked at him.

“The hand with the bird.”

He neither confirmed nor denied it. He did not need to.

The inspector looked down at the photograph, then at the table, already thinking in the language of reports and closure.

Attention shifted for no more than a moment.

The kitchen worker stood.

Not suddenly. Almost naturally, as though standing were simply the next movement in a sequence already under way.

No one stopped him at first because it did not look like an escape.

It looked like an error.

By the time the officer moved, the door was open.

“Stop!”

The command had nowhere to land.

The man was not running. He did not need to.

He reached the corridor and vanished beyond the point where sight could hold him.

Betty looked towards the door, then upward.

“Not through the corridor,” she said. “Up.”

27 — Movement

They did not move at once. There was no need.

The movement was already there.

They left the passage without hurrying, as though nothing had changed. The corridor remained the same. Only the flow was different.

“Up,” Betty said.

No one asked why.

The stairs were narrow and absorbed their footsteps.

On the roof, the wind changed direction before anyone noticed.

The man was not trying to escape.

He stood near the edge, carrying an object he no longer held, its presence visible only in the tension remaining in his hands.

“You’re carrying it,” Betty said.

“It isn’t with me.”

She looked at his hands.

“It is.”

Justine approached without haste. She did not need to stop him.

There was no resistance.

“Where is it?”

The silence carried its own answer.

“You already passed it on,” Betty said.

A brief pause.

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

The wind crossed the roof and shifted the silence.

“To whom?” Justine asked.

“To him. The one who passes through everything and is nowhere.”

That was the real answer.

28 — Break

On the roof, the man's movement did not resemble escape. It looked like the completion of a route already determined.

He was not trying to get away because there was nowhere to return to. The movement had a direction, but no exit.

He stood near the edge, at a distance from which returning no longer seemed possible.

"You're carrying it," Sofi said.

"It isn't with me."

She looked at his hands. The object was gone. Its imprint remained.

"It is."

Justine reached him without sudden movement and stopped him without force. Resistance was no longer possible.

"Where is it?"

The silence carried its own answer.

"You already gave it away," Sofi said.

"I didn't."

"You did."

The silence lasted longer this time.

"To whom?" Justine asked.

"To the one who doesn't carry it."

That was an answer. At that moment, something slipped. Not from his hands. From the movement itself.

It skidded towards the edge of the roof and stopped against the gutter, almost balanced between falling into nothingness and remaining.

Sofi-Betty reached it first.

She did not pick it up immediately. She looked at the way it lay, as though even now it had nowhere it belonged.

Then she lifted it very carefully. Its shape needed no name. The metal wing of a bird. The missing fragment.

Everything absent from it could be imagined precisely. That was why it could be joined to the whole.

She held it for a moment, then placed it on the flat surface of the roof.

Justine came closer but did not touch it.

“That’s it.”

It did not sound like a conclusion.

More like a closure imposing itself.

Only then did the officer approach. He picked it up slowly but precisely, as though he already knew it was not a whole.



“Evidence.”

No one answered. The transformation had already happened.

Sofi-Betty no longer looked at the object. She looked at what held it. The wing had, in a sense, been found in mid-air.

The kitchen worker did not try to explain. He had nothing to explain.

Everything was over.

They went downstairs. The corridor looked unchanged, but what they had been searching for was no longer moving through it.

The wing was in police custody now.

It had a place. It had become evidence.

29 — The Bistro

They had been seeing each other in the garden for some time, between the fountain and the staff entrance, without ever needing to acknowledge it.

Flobjan made his arrangements by disturbing perfection. He left lines open, forms slightly unresolved, as though completion itself would destroy what held them together.

“Perfection retains nothing,” he had once said.

It applied beyond the garden.

Police officers were already stationed at reception. They were no longer asking questions.

“Come out of this atmosphere for a while,” Flobjan said. “You’re tense, pale, exhausted. Have a drink with me. Get some distance. Come back to yourself.”

Now they were sitting in a nearby bistro.

Betty felt better almost immediately. Warmth moved through her body and the rigidity of the past hours began to loosen.

Between them was the kind of agreement that required no declaration. There were no questions demanding precise answers, only a silence in which nothing had to be explained.



“It isn’t over,” Flobjan said.

“I know.”

He looked at her without asking her to confirm what he could already see.

“You’re not going to stay inside it.”

It was not a question.

Betty lowered her eyes to the rim of her glass, where a brief reflection appeared and vanished. She thought of his hands: soil beneath the nails, the scent of plants lingering longer than touch, the way he handled things without possessing them.

“What is your name, Betty?”

She looked at him.

“Sofi. Sofi de Montreuil.”

Her real name settled between them without ceremony, changing their relationship before it had found a place.

30 — The Discovery

Justine arrived earlier than usual and went directly to the sixth floor.

Two uniformed officers followed her, then the hotel director and the manager. Madame Tanja was already there. She asked nothing. The Marseille public prosecutor arrived last, visibly displeased that an investigation of this scale had developed in his jurisdiction without his control.

Betty was waiting in the corridor.

“Now?” Justine asked.

“Now.”

They stopped before the line, at the place where the wall was not a wall.

Justine pressed the point she already knew.

The panel moved.

It did not look like a door opening.

More like a surface withdrawing from its role.

Behind it was a corridor.

Narrow, unmarked, lit by no light belonging to the sixth floor.

For a moment, no one stepped inside.

Then Justine entered. Betty followed. Madame Tanja came last.

The passage had not been designed for comfortable movement. Its walls were scarred at the edges, the floor worn. Everything suggested frequent, discreet use.

“This isn’t part of the hotel,” one of the officers said.

“It is,” Betty replied. “Just not the part intended for guests.”

They moved slowly. The corridor curved gently, preventing them from seeing its end.

Halfway along it, Betty stopped at a recess in the wall. Inside stood a large basket lined with quilted padding. Above it was an opening through which air moved from somewhere beyond the passage.

And much more than air.

“Here,” Betty said.

No one asked what entered there.

At the end of the corridor they found a room.

Small, windowless, functional.

At its centre stood a steel table, its surface almost surgical in its cleanliness.

One of the officers approached.

“Here...”

He stopped.

“He was here.”

Justine studied the room.

“He wasn’t killed here.”

“How do you know?”

“This was a place of passage, not a place of death.”

Betty approached the table.

“He was a courier.”

“For what?”

“For things that cannot be declared.”

“Was he killed, or was it an accident?” the officer asked.

Betty did not answer. Justine did.

“A chain of bad circumstances.”

One of the officers looked around.

“This goes further.”

Behind the table, more fine lines appeared in the wall.

Panels. Several of them. They were not identical.

They did not all lead to the same place.

Justine pressed one. Nothing happened.

“How many?”

No one from the hotel answered. Betty looked back along the passage.

“Enough.”

An officer found a door disguised as another section of wall.

Behind it was a smaller room covered with plans.

Not one plan of the hotel, but many.

Old drawings lay beneath newer ones, layers of architecture accumulating across decades: corridors extended, blocked, redirected; rooms added and divided; walls moved while their previous positions survived underneath.

In some places the drawings corresponded to the hotel above them.

In others, they did not.

There were passages that had vanished from the official plans of the repeatedly rebuilt and extended hotel but not from the building itself.

Corridors leading nowhere. Or beyond the map.

“This has been here a long time,” one of the officers said.

“It was never finished,” Justine said. “It wasn’t meant to be.”

Betty looked at the plans differently. Not as documents. As routes.

“Entrances and exits without visibility.”

Justine said the word aloud.

“Smuggling.”

The word hovered in the room. It explained everything and nothing.

“What actually happened here?” another officer asked. “And how long has this been going on?”

No one answered.

Betty looked at the steel table, then towards the passage through which they had entered.

“It couldn’t hold any longer.”

Justine nodded.

That was as close as they could come to an explanation without pretending they had solved everything.

“Where do the exits we couldn’t open lead?” the Marseille prosecutor asked.

“Probably beyond the hotel,” Justine said. “Some of them towards the port.”

— —

Nothing on the sixth floor was visibly broken.

But nothing responded immediately anymore.

The door to 608 opened only on the second attempt. Key cards hesitated for a fraction of a second, as though the hotel had begun to question who was entitled to pass.

The staff lift stalled between the fifth and sixth floors. Phone signals vanished precisely where the corridor changed width.

One chambermaid turned the wrong way and opened a service door she had never used before.

“Sorry,” she said into the empty space, then stood there bewildered, as though unsure why she had turned at all — and why she had apologised when no one was there.

For the first time, Betty thought the hotel itself was no longer remaining the same.

31 — The Whole

The lounge had been arranged for closure.

Chairs aligned, intervals measured, light even, doors shut. Police stood along the wall, the prosecutor by the window, the director and manager near the table. Madame Tanja occupied a place belonging to neither side. Justine stood between them with a notebook she never opened.

Everyone was where they were supposed to be.

That was why it could end.

At the centre of the table, on the clean surface, lay the wing.

Not displayed. Not concealed. Placed. A part waiting to be returned.

No one touched it. There was no need. Everyone already knew where it belonged, although no one could show the whole.

Justine looked up.

“We have the missing piece.”

No one answered. There was nothing to add.

The director looked from the wing to Justine, as though checking the order in which the next steps were supposed to occur.

“The object enters procedure,” he said. “It will be entered into evidence.”

The wording was precise.

It meant there was a place for it.

The manager nodded.

An officer stepped towards the table and waited for the signal to take it.

Everything was ready.

Betty stood apart, without a place that belonged to her.

She was looking at the arrangement, not at the people.

For the first time, she did not know whether what she saw should be preserved or removed.

Then she moved.

Without asking permission, without disturbing the rhythm, she went to the table and picked up the wing.

For a moment, no one reacted.

She turned it in her hands, examining the surface with her fingertips almost tenderly, lingering over the joint where metal had once met the hand.

“That is evidence,” the prosecutor warned.

He was looking not at Betty, but at the empty place on the table, as though the object should still have been there.

“It is a fragment,” the director said.

“It can be returned,” someone added.

The sentences came easily.

They closed what was already prepared to be closed.

Betty kept the wing in her hand, feeling especially the joint where it had met the hand. Beneath her fingers were the irregularities left by time, the minute damage invisible while the whole could still stand upright.

No one in the room moved.

Her breathing suddenly became audible, deep, as though she had been running. Her eyes burned.

For a moment, the wing remained suspended between the table and her body, an object still waiting for a decision.

Then she raised it and brought it down against the edge of the table.



The sound was surprisingly small. A brief resistance giving way. A line opened. Not suddenly.

As though what had already been divided were simply separating again.

Two pieces remained in her hands. She did not put them down immediately.

The officer stopped midway towards her, his hand suspended in the air without an object to take.

The prosecutor stepped forward, then stopped. The director did not look away.

The manager tried to speak, but no word fit.

Justine did not write. She watched her sister.

There was no longer a place on the table for what was supposed to be returned. The two pieces could no longer be joined. The whole no longer existed.

Betty placed them on the table, apart from one another.

She left no possibility of restoring them to the same relation.

The distance between them was small. Enough. Everything else remained in place. The table.

The light. The people.

“Why?” Justine asked.

Not a question about the act itself.

A question about the reason beneath it.

Betty looked at the table, then at the lines left without a whole.

“To see whether it could be interrupted.”

No one reacted. There was no room for reaction.

“And?”

This time Betty raised her eyes to all of them.

Not as a witness.

As someone who had made a decision larger than herself.

“It can be broken.”

A fact. Nothing in the lounge changed.

The chairs remained aligned. The intervals remained the same.

But the procedure could no longer continue as intended. Not because the evidence was gone, but because the whole on which its meaning depended no longer existed.

The prosecutor closed the file, though not completely.

The officer lowered his hand. The director remained where he was. The manager did not look away. Madame Tanja gave no reaction.

Justine closed her notebook. Betty turned and left.

— —

At the instant the wing broke, the staff lift stopped between floors.

The lights throughout the hotel flickered once. The internet signal vanished. Several guests later complained of a brief loss of orientation.

In the garden, Flobjan stood before an arrangement that could no longer be what it had been.

Betty walked towards the main entrance and stopped.

For the first time, she could no longer tell where the guest corridor ended and the service passage began.

32 — The Encounter

He did not approach her immediately.

Flobjan stood at the far end of the corridor.

Sofi saw him before he began walking towards her, and a smile lit her face. That alone was an enormous change.

He came without hurry, light falling over him too, and stopped at a distance that was not accidental.

“I know,” he said.

Not a question. Not a conclusion.

More like a place they had both already reached.

He glanced towards the sixth floor, then back at her.

“You did what no one here even tried to do.”

The sentence required no confirmation.

Sofi said nothing. There was nothing to add to what was already visible.

Flobjan lowered his eyes for a moment, as though for the first time searching for words that did not belong to their old relationship, then looked at her again.

“I’m proud of you.”

Everything was in that sentence.

Sofi kept her eyes on him, not beyond him. She noticed his sleeves pushed above his forearms, the slow movement of his hand as he shifted his weight, a tension that no longer belonged only to work. His voice was deeper than before, free of the hotel’s control.

“Come to lunch with me. Now.”

No preamble. No justification.

“There’s a place,” he said. “It overlooks the sea.”

For the first time Sofi lowered her eyes, not to avoid him, but to hold on to what had just shifted inside her.

Then she looked at him again.

His lips were slightly damp, his voice steady, effortless.

“Now?”

“Now. Yes. Right now.”

She nodded without checking the time, without thinking of obligations.

None of that was necessary anymore.

They walked down the corridor together, neither ahead nor behind, their pace falling naturally into step.

At the exit she stopped briefly, out of habit, and looked back at the hotel — no longer as a system, but as a place.

Then at him.

“Where?”

Flobjan smiled without reserve.

“The most beautiful place in Marseille.”

He said it not as a promise, but as a fact.

They stepped outside.

This time she had no need to know where anything belonged.

The hotel remained behind her, asking nothing.

The light outside did not alter the arrangement of things.

It altered the way she saw them.

Sofi no longer looked at things to discover where they did not belong.

She looked at him — his hands, the line of his neck, and lips now closer than the door between two rooms had ever been.

Record

There was no public announcement.

The official record stated that the case had been closed for lack of evidence.

Formally, it was over. Sofi knew what that meant. She had not closed it. She had not restored anything.

She had interrupted it. It was not victory.

It was the feeling of being free within herself.

Nothing in the hotel changed from the outside. Corridors kept their direction, doors their numbers, everything remained in its place.

Only the hotel no longer decided in quite the same way.

Several months later, the sixth floor was renumbered on the hotel's internal plan.

No reason was ever given.

During the renovation that followed, the passage between 601 and 602 was sealed.

The thickness of the new wall did not correspond to the original plans of the building.

Sofi-Betty remained at the hotel. Betty, when she needed to see. Sofi, when she was free to choose.

Between the two, she was no longer divided.

She was in her place.

For the first time, she did not check where things belonged.

She moved on. Not out of the hotel. Through it. Towards what had not happened yet.

About the Author

Claire Delaunay

Claire Delaunay is the literary pseudonym of Serbian writer Jasmina Mihajlović.

Under this name she writes the Marseille Trilogy — Passage, Between and Second Life — a cycle of novels that combines psychological fiction, crime, memory and metaphysical themes. Set in Marseille and Lyon, the trilogy explores hidden systems of identity, invisible structures of power, intimate relationships, and the fragile boundary between reality and illusion.

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Jasmina Mihajlović is a Serbian writer, essayist and literary scholar.

She is the author of numerous novels, books of essays and literary studies, and one of the foremost interpreters of the work of Milorad Pavić, whose literary legacy she manages. Her books, essays and scholarly works have been published and translated in several countries.

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Her work explores memory, identity, literature, art, dreams and the hidden structures that shape human lives.