

READ WHAT THE WORLD
IS SAYING ABOUT

MAESTRA

'Funny and clever, entertaining and well written, with smart, knowing references to everything from *Grazia* magazine to the Italian baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi . . . Destined for the bestseller charts'

Louise France, *The Times*

'Set to be the "it" book of the year . . . Judith Rashleigh is a love-to-hate anti-heroine with a screw loose who could give *Gone Girl*'s Amy Dunne a run for her money'

Hannah Britt, *Daily Express*

'A blockbuster and a half. It's a gripping story . . . it's going to take Britain by storm'

Kate Williams, *Mail on Sunday*

'Outlandish and entertaining . . . smart and scathing'

Stephanie Meritt, *Observer*

'Fantastically good fun . . . L.S. Hilton can write. She can even make you think that popping along to a sex party is quite a good idea . . . She knows about history. She knows about power. She knows about money, sex and power. And she knows about pleasure'

Christina Patterson, *Sunday Times*

‘A decadent tale of lust and lacy underwear . . . Sharp and extremely well written’

Jan Moir, *Daily Mail*

‘Hilton can both actually write and plot . . . an entertaining and thoroughly escapist romp with a commanding femme fatale at the helm’

Lucy Scholes, *BBC*

‘A deliciously decadent chase through international capitals, with bodies dropping as fast as the mention of designer labels . . . a glamorous and racy adventure’

Sunday Mirror

‘You’ll love it if you liked *The Talented Mr Ripley*’

Cosmopolitan

‘Set to be the beach read of the summer, tracing the rise of art house assistant Judith Rashleigh as she embarks on the summer of a lifetime. Murder, sex, deceit, designer wares and devious men, it’s all there in abundance’

Hannah Dunn, *Red*

‘A pacy, sexy thriller set in the decadent world of the super-rich with a resourceful heroine at its heart’

Fanny Blake, *Woman and Home*

‘Brimming with scandal, intrigue and mystery, this is a book that everyone is talking about’

Heat

'A first-class psychological thriller . . . Read it now before the entire world does'

Glamour

'A spectacular act of revenge on the English upper class . . . coldly furious, exuberant, wish-fulfilling'

Catherine Brown, *Standpoint*

'In a cat fight Judith would walk all over Anastasia from *Fifty Shades*. She's feisty, independent, hard-nosed and figuratively always on top. And the sex scenes, whisper it, are really rather good'

Metro Book Club

'*Maestra* is already being touted as the new *Fifty Shades of Grey* – it's not, being a thriller which is far cleverer and immeasurably more skilfully executed'

Liadan Hynes, *Belfast Telegraph*

'*Maestra* twists and turns to morph into a crime thriller packed with . . . nail-biting antics and scandalous seductions'

Marie Claire

'A psychological thriller set on the French Riviera, rather like Patricia Highsmith crossed with *Gone Girl*: unsurprisingly, there's a film deal in the works'

Harpers Bazaar

'A fast-paced romp with an amoral and immoral heroine . . . *Maestra* lives up to the hype'

Red

USA

'This year's most erotic novel makes *Fifty Shades* look like the Bible . . . Bound to be the It beach book of the summer'

New York Post

'A shopathon travelogue thriller that has billionaires, art world scheming and a sociopathic heroine who can unfasten belt buckles with her tongue'

The New York Times

'What makes a woman who'll do anything to get what she wants so threatening and thrilling? . . . It's Judith's modes of retaliation that make her a radical heroine. She deploys a uniquely female arsenal . . . weaponizing femininity . . . It's hard not to feel vicariously empowered by a woman unapologetically in pursuit'

O, The Oprah Magazine

'Maestra will be one of this year's most talked-about novels . . . Judith may well be a more interesting character [than Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley] . . . More mayhem, more art – and certainly more sex – lie ahead for insatiable Judith and for all those consenting adults who will delight in her endless ups and downs'

The Washington Post

'Jubilantly mordant. . . . Already optioned for the big screen by Amy Pascal, [this is] the story of a twenty-first-century femme fatale as lethal as Tom Ripley and as seductive as Bacall'

Vogue

‘A taut, meaty thriller that’s certainly on par with those bestselling ‘girls’ in terms of intrigue, surprising twists, and unputdownableness, while Judith Rashleigh’s single-minded and self-centered quest for wealth and acceptance could well be the most compelling since Patrick Bateman’s’

Chicago Review of Books

IRELAND

‘A glamorous, witty and adrenaline-fuelled romp – if you like your heroines sexy, vengeful, amoral and lethal, *Maestra* delivers in spades’

Declan Burke, *Irish Times*

‘One of the books of the year . . . This is Jackie Collins crossed with Jo Nesbo. Irresistibly entertaining’

Edel Coffey, *Irish Independent*

AUSTRALIA

‘Shocking? Yes – but also completely unputdownable’
Sue Turnbull, *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘It’s a killer of a book . . . an all-nighter dripping with blood and glamour . . . lewd, luscious and lowdown . . . it ups the ante way past any Scandi dragon girls’

Peter Craven, *The Australian*

‘A wild ride – this is not for the faint-hearted’

Elyse Pickens, *Brisbane News*

EUROPE

'This story is terrific . . . Hilton's heroine is beautiful, intelligent, dangerous and very pleasure-oriented. The result: in *Maestra* you will find not only murder but also plenty of very hot sex'

Freundin

'This thriller is pure suspense, with real pace and a little taste of art history combined with extensive sex scenes and an extraordinary heroine'

Buchmedia Magazin

'A sparkling surprise from the first page to the last, high-quality entertainment from someone who knows how to write'

La Repubblica

'A mix of eroticism and adrenaline, and – at last – a smart character. The intertwining of sex and power is the strong point of the whole novel'

Il Fatto Quotidiano

'The first volume in a trilogy that will become a Hollywood film, but will first be a literary sensation: if you can resist being scandalised, you won't put it down until the last page'

Vanity Fair (Italy)

'The book you should be reading right now is a hot thriller, crackling and well written'

Gioia

‘A literary blockbuster’

La Gazzetta dello Sport

‘Not *Fifty Shades of Grey*: L.S. Hilton can write. This is colourful, elegant and to the point’

De Morgen

‘*Maestra* is an extraordinarily accomplished first part of a trilogy that earns Judith Rashleigh a place on the list of memorable female characters in the world of thrillers’

Hebban.nl

‘Judith is sexy, smart and very dangerous . . . Great plot, juicy sex scenes, a stylish and fierce femme fatale – finally, the perfect thriller’

Cosmopolitan (Poland)

‘Once you start reading, something becomes clear: once you start, it’s impossible to stop . . . The quality bestseller is back – and, this time, women have the power’

Vanity Fair (Spain)

‘The new publishing phenomenon that’s sweeping through the bookshops . . . Addictive from beginning to end, *Maestra* tells a tale that combines suspense, violence, sex, luxury, art and fashion’

Glamour (Spain)

‘A story that hooks you from paragraph two’

El País



MAESTRA



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*To the Norse God of Everything,
with thanks.*



Prologue

Heavy hems and vicious heels swooped and clacked over the parquet. We crossed the hallway to a set of double doors, the low hum within indicating that the men were already inside. The room was lit with candles, small tables positioned between sofas and low dining chairs. The waiting men were dressed in thick black satin pyjamas with frogged jackets, the sheen in the weft of the fabric offsetting their starched shirts. An occasional heavy cufflink or slim watch flashed gold in the candlelight, an embroidered monogram rippled beneath a flamboyant silk handkerchief. It would have felt silly, theatrical, had the details not been so perfect, but I felt hypnotised, my pulse slow and deep. Yvette was being led away by a man with a peacock feather pinned in his cuff – I looked up and saw another man approaching me, a gardenia like my own in his lapel.

‘So it works like that?’

‘While we eat, yes. Afterwards you can choose. *Bonsoir*.’

‘*Bonsoir*.’

He was tall and slim, though his body was younger than his face, rather hard and lined, with greying hair swept back over a high forehead and large, slightly hooded eyes, like a Byzantine saint. He led me to a sofa,

waited while I sat and handed me a plain crystal glass of white wine, clean and flinty. The formality was arch, but I liked the choreography. Julien clearly appreciated the pleasure of anticipation. The mostly nude waitresses reappeared with small plates of tiny lobster pastries, then shavings of duck breast in a honey and ginger paste, tuiles of raspberries and strawberries. Gestures at food, nothing to sate us.

‘Red fruit makes a woman’s cunt taste so beautiful,’ my dinner companion remarked.

‘I know.’

There was some quiet conversation, but mostly people watched and drank, their eyes moving from one another to the swift movements of the waitresses, who had dancers’ bodies, I saw, slim but strongly muscled, their calves full over their tight boots. Moonlighting from the *corps de ballet*? I saw Yvette dimly across the room, being fed almond-stuffed figs with a sharp-tined silver fork, her body laid out like a serpent’s, one dark thigh a hint between the red silk. Solemnly, the waitresses circled the room with candle snuffers, dimming the lights in a cloud of beeswax, and as they did so I felt the man’s hand on my thigh, circling and stroking, entirely unhurried, and an answering tautness between my legs. The girls set out shallow lacquered trays containing condoms, small crystal bottles of monoi oil, lube decanted into bonbon dishes. Some of the couples were kissing, happy with their matched partners, others rose politely and crossed the room to find the prey

they had selected earlier. Yvette's robe was tumbled about her parted legs, a man's head dipped to her. I caught her eye, and she smiled, luxuriously, before letting her head fall back among the cushions with the ecstatic motion of a junkie nodding out.



PART ONE

OUTSIDE



1

If you asked me how it began, I could truthfully say that the first time, it was an accident. It was about six in the evening, the time when the city churns again on its axis, and though the streets above were full of the sharp wind of another piss-miserable May, the station was stuffy and humid, squalid with discarded tabloids and fast-food wrappings, irritable tourists in garish leisurewear crammed amidst the resigned, sallow-faced commuters. I was waiting on the platform for the Piccadilly line Tube at Green Park after another fabulous start to another fabulous week of being bullied and patronised at my super-fabulous job. As the train on the opposite side pulled away, a low collective groan rippled through the crowd. The board showed that the next Tube was stuck at Holborn. Someone on the tracks, probably. Typical, you could see people thinking. Why did they always have to top themselves at rush hour? The passengers across the line were moving off, amongst them a girl in crippling heels and an electric-blue bandage dress. Last season's Alaïa via Zara, I thought. Probably on her way to Leicester Square with the other rube losers. She had extraordinary hair, a great cascading plum-coloured

mane of extensions with some sort of gold thread bound through them that caught and held the neon light.

‘Judeee! Judy! Is that you?’

She started waving at me enthusiastically. I pretended not to hear.

‘Judy! Over here!’

People were beginning to look. The girl had hobbled precariously close to the yellow safety stripe.

‘It’s me! Leanne!’

‘Your friend’s waving to you,’ said the woman next to me, helpfully.

‘I’ll see you upstairs in a min!’ I didn’t hear voices like hers very often anymore. I’d never expected to hear hers again. She obviously wasn’t going to disappear, and the train showed no sign of appearing, so I settled my heavy leather briefcase across my shoulder and pushed my way back through the crowd. She was waiting on the gangway between the platforms.

‘Hiya! I thought it was you!’

‘Hi, Leanne,’ I tried gingerly.

She tripped the last few steps towards me and threw her arms around me like I was her long-lost sister.

‘Look at you! Dead professional. I didn’t know you lived in London!’ I didn’t point out that this was probably because I hadn’t spoken to her in a decade. Facebook friends weren’t really my style, and nor did I need to be reminded, ever, of where I had come from.



Then I felt like a bitch. ‘You look great, Leanne. I love your hair.’

‘I don’t go by Leanne anymore, actually. It’s Mercedes now.’

‘Mercedes? That’s . . . nice. I use Judith mostly. Sounds more grown up.’

‘Yeah, well, look at us, eh? All grown up.’

I don’t think I knew, then, what that felt like. I wondered if she did either.

‘Listen, I’ve got an hour before work.’ *Werk*. ‘Do you fancy a quick drink? Catch up?’

I could have said I was busy, that I was in a rush, taken her number like I was actually going to call it. But where did I have to get to? And there was something in that voice, strangely welcome in its familiarity, that made me feel lonely and reassured at the same time. I had just two twenty-pound notes in the world, and there were three days before payday. Still, something might turn up.

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Let me buy you a drink. Let’s go to the Ritz.’

Two champagne cocktails in the Rivoli bar, £38. I had twelve on my Oyster card and two in hand. I just wouldn’t have much to eat until the end of the week. It was stupid, maybe, to show off like that, but sometimes you need to show the world a bit of defiance. Leanne – Mercedes – fished enthusiastically with a fuchsia shellac nail extension for the bobbing maraschino and took a cheerful slurp.

‘That’s dead nice, thanks. Though I prefer Roederer now, myself.’



Well that served me right for being flash.

‘I work round here,’ I volunteered. ‘Art. In an auction house. I do Old Masters.’ I didn’t, actually, but then I wasn’t sweating that Leanne would know a Reubens from a Rembrandt.

‘Posh,’ she replied. She looked bored now, fiddling with the swizzle-stick in her drink. I wondered if she was sorry she had called out to me, but instead of feeling annoyed I had a pathetic feeling that I wanted to please her.

‘Sounds it,’ I said confidentially, feeling the brandy and the sugar soothing their way into my blood, ‘but the pay’s crap. I’m skint, usually.’

‘Mercedes’ told me she had been in London for a year. She worked in a champagne bar in St James’s. ‘Reckons it’s classy, but it’s full of the same dirty old gits. Nothing dodgy,’ she added hastily. ‘It’s only a bar. The tips are amazing though.’

She claimed she was making two grand a week. ‘Puts weight on you, though,’ she said ruefully, prodding her tiny belly. ‘All that drinking. Still, we don’t have to pay for it. Pour it into the plants if we have to, Olly says.’

‘Olly?’

‘He’s the owner. Eh, you should come down sometime, Judy. Moonlight a bit, if you’re brassic. Olly’s always looking for girls. D’you want another one?’

An older couple in black tie, probably on their way to the opera, took the table opposite us. The woman ran her eyes critically over Mercedes’ fake-tanned legs, her shimmering

cleavage. Mercedes swivelled in her chair, and slowly and deliberately uncrossed and recrossed her legs, giving me and the poor old bugger next to her a flash of black lace G-string, all the time staring straight into the woman's eyes. There was no need to ask if anyone had a problem.

'As I was saying,' she said, when the woman turned beet-faced to the cocktail menu, 'it's a laugh.' *Laff*. 'The girls are from all over. You could look smashing, if you got a bit dolled up. Come on.'

I looked down at my black tweed Sandro suit. Nipped-in jacket, flippy pleated skirt. It was meant to look knowingly coquettish, professional with a little Left Bank spin – at least that's what I told myself when I clumsily mended the hems for the umpteenth time – but next to Mercedes I looked like a depressed crow.

'Now?'

'Yeah, why not? I've got loads of stuff in me bag.'

'I don't know, Leanne.'

'Mercedes.'

'Sorry.'

'Come on, you can wear my lace top. It'll look ace with your tits. Unless you've got a date?'

'No,' I said, tipping my head right back to catch the last drops of bubbles and angostura. 'No, I haven't got a date.'



2

I read somewhere that cause and effect are safeguards against contingency, against the terrifyingly inaccurate mutability of chance. Why did I go with Leanne that day? It hadn't been worse than any other. But choices are made before explanations, whether or not we care to know it. In the art world, there are only two auction houses you really need to know about. They're the ones who make the hundred-million-pound sales, who handle the collections of desperate dukes and socially anxious oligarchs, who funnel a thousand years' worth of beauty and artisanship through their museum-quiet rooms and turn it into hard, sexy cash. When I'd landed the job in British Pictures three years ago, I had finally felt like I'd made it. For a day or two, anyway. I soon twigged that that the porters, the blokes who did the actual lifting, were the only people who cared anything about pictures. The rest of them might have been flogging matchsticks or butter. Despite the fact that I'd been employed on merit, despite my hard work, diligence and generally rather impressive knowledge of art, I was forced to admit that as far as the standards of the House went, I was distinctly not made of awesome. After a couple of weeks in the department, I had realised that no one there really cared if you could

tell a Breughel from a Bonnard, that there were other, more vital codes to crack.

There were quite a few things I still liked about my job at the House after three years. I liked walking past the uniformed doorman into the orchid-scented lobby. I liked the satisfyingly reverent looks the clients reserved for “experts” as I climbed the imposing oak staircase, because naturally, everything about the House looked like three centuries’ worth of imposing. I liked eavesdropping on the conversations of the identikit Eurosecretaries, their French and Italian vowels flicking as crisply as their hair. I liked that, unlike them, I wasn’t angling to snare a passing hedgie in the tendrils of my blow-dry. I was proud of what I had achieved, winning an assistant’s position after a year of interning in British Pictures. Not that I intended to remain in the department for long. I wouldn’t be spending the rest of my life looking at pictures of dogs and horses.

That day, the day I bumped into Leanne, had started with an email from Laura Belvoir, the deputy head of department. It was headed ‘Action Immediately!’ yet there was no text in the body. I walked across the office to ask her what she actually wanted. The bosses had recently been on a management course and Laura had really got behind the idea of desk-to-desk digital communication, though unfortunately she hadn’t yet worked round to typing.

‘I need you to do the attributions for the Longhis.’

We were preparing a series of conversation pieces by the Venetian artist for the upcoming Italian sale.

‘You want me to check the titles in the warehouse?’

‘No, Judith. That’s Rupert’s job. Go to the Heinz and see if you can identify the subjects.’ Rupert was the head of department, who seldom appeared before eleven.

The Heinz Archive has a huge catalogue of named images – I was to look up which particular English lordlings on their eighteenth-century gap year gaieties might have sat for Longhi, as identification of particular individuals could make them more interesting to buyers.

‘OK. Have you got a set of photographs, please?’

Laura sighed. ‘In the library. They’re marked as Longhi-slash-Spring.’

Since the House occupied a whole block, it was a four-minute walk from the department to the library, and it was one I did many times every day. Despite rumours of it being the twenty-first century outside, the House was still run largely like a Victorian bank. Many of the employees spent their days plodding round the corridors delivering scrips of paper to one another. The archive and the library were hardly even properly computerised; often one stumbled across little Dickensian ghosts wedged despairingly into obscure cubby holes between mounds of receipts and triplicate photostat-ted accounts. I retrieved the envelope of pictures and went back to my desk for my bag. My phone rang.

‘Allo? It’s Serena onna desk. I’ve got Rupert’s trousers here.’

So I schlepped to reception, picked up the vast bag from Rupert’s tailor, couriered over the 500-odd metres from



Savile Row, and took it back to the department. Laura looked up.

‘Haven’t you gone yet, Judith? What on earth have you been doing? Well, since you’re here, please could you get me a cappuccino? Don’t go to the canteen, go to that nice little place in Crown Passage. Get a receipt.’

Coffee fetched, I set off on foot towards the archive. I had five photographs in my bag, scenes at the Fenice theatre, the Zattere and a coffee house on the Rialto, and after working through the boxes for a couple of hours, I’d made a list of twelve positive identifications of sitters who had been in Italy contemporaneously with the portraits. I cross referenced the Heinz index with the pictures so that the attribution could be checked for the catalogue and took them back to Laura.

‘What are these?’

‘The Longhis you asked me to do.’

‘These are the Longhis from the sale six years ago. Really, Judith. The photos were on my email to you this morning.’ That would have been the email with no content.

‘But, Laura, you said they were in the library.’

‘I meant the electronic library.’

I didn’t say anything. I logged on to the department’s online catalogue, found the correct pictures (filed as Lunghi), downloaded them to my phone and went back to the Heinz with a flea in my ear from Laura for wasting time. I’d finished the second lot of attributions by the time she was back from lunch at the Caprice, and got on with



cold-calling invitees who hadn't RSVP'd to the private view for the sale. Then I wrote up the bios and emailed them to Laura and Rupert, showed Laura how to open the attachment, took the Tube to the Applied Arts depository near Chelsea Harbour to check on a silk sample which Rupert thought might match with a hanging in the Longhis, discovered to no one's surprise that it didn't, walked most of the way back because the Circle line was stuck at Edgware Road and detoured to Lillywhite's on Piccadilly to pick up a sleeping bag for Laura's son's school camping trip, reappearing exhausted and grimy at 5.30 to another reprimand for missing the departmental viewing of the paintings I'd spent the morning working on.

'Honestly, Judith,' Laura remarked, 'you'll never make any progress if you're haring about town when you could be looking at the works.'

Twitches on invisible threads aside, maybe it wasn't all that surprising that when I came across Leanne at the Tube station a little later, I really did feel like a drink.