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Maestra

Written by L. S. Hilton

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MAESTRA

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Until the train crossed the border, I didn't allow myself to think. I took slow sips of water and tried to look interested in French reality-TV stars I couldn't recognise. Then I stared at the Chagall biography, reminding myself to turn a page now and then. Outside the window, what must once have been enchanting hill villages went by, muddled with motorway and newly built villas amongst huge low greenhouses. At Ventimiglia I changed for the Genoa train, and suddenly I was in Italy proper. The last time I'd been there was on that month-long study bursary to Rome after my undergraduate degree, and I remembered the feeling, the shift in the light, the enveloping chatter of the language. The carriage was now filled with young men with huge watches and huger sunglasses that would have looked really gay were it not for that ineffable Italian self-confidence, neatly groomed women with good leather shoes and too much gold jewellery, an American couple with backpacks and guidebooks and appalling sandals. At Genoa I changed again. I'd always wanted to go to Portofino, but apparently the train didn't go there, a station clerk told me in Italian, only to a place called Santa Margherita. Then there was a bus, or a taxi. No one had yet asked to see my passport, but I knew I'd have to show it if I wanted to get a hotel. I went over the trail in my head: Judith Rashleigh lands at Nice airport – we had not arrived with James – and a few days later she turns up in Portofino. What was there to connect her with a dead man who for all I knew was still waiting in the fragrant darkness of the

Eden Roc? Nothing, necessarily. I'd have to risk it, or else sleep on the beach.

Santa Margherita looked idyllic, the sort of place I could imagine Audrey Hepburn going on holiday. Tall old houses in yellow and ochre framed a double bay, cutting off at a headland with a marina where super yachts bobbed next to wooden fishing boats. The air smelled of gardenias and ozone; even the children scrambling about on the beach looked chic, in neat linen smocks and shorts, not a hideous sequined T-shirt in sight. By the time I had staggered down the grey slate steps from the station to the seafront, I'd really had it with the broken Chanel bag. Portofino could wait. I needed a shower and some fresh clothes. There were several hotels on the first curve of the bay, opposite the public beach and an enclosed private bathing area with red-and-white striped umbrellas and sun loungers arranged in precise Italian rows. I didn't think, just turned into the nearest and asked for a room. I spoke English, thinking that it would make me less conspicuous. When the woman at reception asked for my credit card, I said something quick and complex that I didn't expect her to catch, and cheerfully waved a couple of 200-euro notes. She let me pay in advance for two nights and asked for my passport. I had the same feeling I used to get at the cash point at the end of the month as she logged the details laboriously into a computer, and tried to keep a pleasant smile on my face. She reached for a phone. Christ, was she calling the *carabinieri*? Don't panic, don't panic. I could drop my bags and be out of there, the roll of notes safe in my pocket, in seconds. There was a taxi rank just outside, a single Audi idling as the driver smoked out of the window. I had to struggle to keep my breathing even, to resist the urge in my muscles to sprint for it.

It was housekeeping. She was calling housekeeping to check that the room was made up. She handed me an old-fashioned key with a heavy brass fob and wished me a pleasant stay. I gestured that I would take up my own bags. Once in the room I dumped my stuff on the bed, opened the window and ignored the 'No Smoking' sign. I was surprised to see that the sun was low behind the headland, making purple ribbons of the waves. I had been travelling all day. No, I was on the run. On the lam.

The pale pink curtains bellied in the sea breeze. I started, gasped aloud. A second in which the fabric formed two swollen arms, reaching for me. I froze, my heart banging so loudly I could hear it even over the regular beat of the surf outside. Then I giggled to myself. James might have looked like the bogeyman, but he was gone. I had 8,470 euro in cash, no job and a dead man behind me in another country. I thought briefly of texting Leanne, decided against it. I'd get a new phone tomorrow, transfer the numbers, drop the old one in the harbour. I dragged on my cigarette and waited for the fear to return. It didn't. I was in Italy in high summer and for the first time in my entire life, I was free. I didn't have to worry about money for quite a while. I considered a little celebration, but told myself to calm down. I couldn't wipe the stupid smirk off my face, though. For once, I didn't need to get laid to feel untouchable.

I showered and changed, took a walk along the port, drank a modest glass of white wine outside a bar, smoked and read my book and looked around me. I had forgotten the effect that Italy has on English people, the way everyone does seem to be so good-looking, the waiters so charming, the food so

delicious. Life really does seem to be *bella*. After eating *trofie* with real, luminous-green pesto and slivers of potato and green beans I went back to the hotel. No messages on my phone. I stripped and inserted myself between starched pale pink sheets and slept perfectly.

Next morning I found my way to the main square, irregular around the white façade of a baroque church. A few stalls selling bunches of basil and bulbous tomatoes had been set up. Older women in nylon housecoats, clearly residents, were poking amongst them with string bags, while what were obviously summer people, discreetly wealthy, did some immaculate ciao-ing between two cafés. I collected *Nice Matin* and *La Repubblica* from the news kiosk; no point in bothering with day-old English papers. I ordered a *cappuccino* and a brioche *con marmellata* and looked through them carefully, scanning the columns at the side for any brief mention of the Eden Roc, or an English body. Nothing. The jam between the delicate layers of brioche was apricot, still warm, and the bartender had left a chocolate heart on the beige hood of my cappuccino: ‘*Per la bellissima signorina*’.

I spent the morning wandering slowly round Santa Margherita’s many tiny boutiques. This was a destination for rich people, as the bemused faces of the cruise ship passengers chugged in for the day showed; it might look quaint and old-fashioned, but the prices were twenty-first-century Milan. Still, the day was so lovely it would have been an insult to the universe to economise just yet. I picked up a couple of bikinis, a wide-brimmed straw hat with a thick black silk band that made me smile to look at it, some neat caramel ballerinas from a cobbler who fetched my size out of a heap of boxes in his dark, leather-scented cubby hole of a shop, and splurged

on an irresistibly charming Miu Miu sundress, orange flowers on a white background with a bandeau neck and a flared, Fifties-style skirt that made my waist tinier. Italian Judith, it seemed, was more demure than her English cousin. I didn't want to think too much about what I should do. After a night's sleep, the horror journey from France felt, itself, like a dream. I had had no thought beyond getting away, but now I needed a plan. But the town was so pretty, a pastel of jasmine and sunshine, sensible had rather lost its appeal.

Maybe Italy was sensible, though, for a time. I could spend a couple of weeks there, if I moved on somewhere cheaper, and still have enough to manage carefully for a couple of months when I got back. Some of poor old James's fifties were still racked up in my savings account. I hesitated for a while, then bought a pre-paid phonecard from a *tabaccheria* and left a voicemail for one of my flatmates. I hadn't bothered to tell them I was going anywhere, and didn't imagine for a moment that they'd care, but they might notice after a while. My rent was paid up quarterly, so there was nothing to worry about there. I said that I'd gone to visit some friends abroad and might stay on for a few weeks, remembered to add that I hoped the summer exams went well. In a back street away from the port, where the smart restaurants gave way to estate agents and electrical goods shops, I found a phone store and replaced my mobile. I got the wi-fi password from the hotel and used the new phone for a quick check of the English papers on the web. Still nothing. In the afternoon I went to the public beach, mostly full of teenagers who stared but didn't bother me. Then I showered the salt from my hair, fastened my new dress and applied a little make-up – mascara, gloss, a touch of blush. Pretty, not shouty.

I wanted to ask the cabbie if he was having a laugh when he told me it would be fifty euro for the five-kilometre drive to Portofino, but he looked bored and said, ‘*così*’. They had a monopoly, I supposed – the kind of people who could stay at the Splendido wouldn’t be caught dead on a public bus. The road unspooled in a narrow gap between the sea and steep cliffs, so narrow that only one vehicle could pass at a time. We got stuck in the Ligurian rush hour, Porsche SUVs and BMWs driven by irritable-looking mammas in the ubiquitous giant glasses, the back seats full of sandy children and plump, mournful Filipinas. The driver swore and drummed his hands on the wheel, but I didn’t mind. Through the window I could smell the fig trees that overhung the deep emerald water of little rocky bays, and through the trees I glimpsed ridiculously palatial nineteenth-century villas. I’d read up on Portofino: it pleased me to know that people who thought these things mattered said that the best Bellinis in the world were made here, not at Harry’s Bar in Venice. Tragic really, my little grasps at status.

The square of the tiny fishing village had featured heavily in the celeb mags at the Gstaad Club, Beyoncé teetering down a gangplank, Leonardo DiCaprio scowling from under a baseball cap, but the pap shots hadn’t given a sense of how small the place was. Just a single street leading down to a space not much bigger than a tennis court, albeit a tennis court surrounded with Dior and cashmere shops. I crossed to the café on the left side and ordered a Bellini from a silver-haired waiter straight from central casting. Of course that was a cliché, but then the whole of Portofino looked like a cliché, everyone’s fantasy of the *bel paese*. He reappeared with a thick glass goblet filled with snowy pink peach slush, reverently

opened a half-bottle of Veuve Clicquot and stirred the champagne carefully into the fruit. Little dishes of oily smoked ham, caperberries, crostini and thumbnail-sized hunks of Parmesan surrounded it. I sipped. It was delicious, the kind of drink you could swallow until you slid down the wall, but I made it last, watching the last tourist ferry pull away from the harbour in a flutter of Japanese camera phones. The sun was still strong, but gentle now, softening the sky behind the promontory to the west of the village, capped with its wedding-cake church. I licked salt and peach juice from my lips, a sensual Instagram. I knew I should feel sad about what had happened to James, but if only because it had so strangely given me this moment, I couldn't.

An elegant wooden boat was tying up at the dockside, one of the traditional Genovese fishing boats called *gozzi*, with smart navy cushions and a white sun-canopy. A group of people were scrambling out, about my age, calling their thanks to the driver, who was naked except for cut-off denims and a nautical cap, with improbable bright blond hair poking out underneath. I remembered that the Vikings had sailed along this coast long ago, and that blond, blue-eyed Italians were not uncommon here, or in Sicily. I was fascinated by the group, four men and two women. There was a relaxed possessiveness to the way they moved through this space, as though there was nothing special about being in Portofino, as though they were unaware that this was the locus of so many cramped commuter dreams. They sprawled at a table close to me and lit cigarettes, ordered drinks, began to make phone calls which, from what I could overhear, concerned whose house they were going to meet up in for dinner later, with other friends. I watched. The girls were not strictly beautiful, but they had that show-pony

sheen that comes from generations of confident money, long legs and narrow ankles, glossy hair, perfect teeth, no make-up. One wore what was obviously her boyfriend's shirt over her bikini top, a monogram discreetly visible in the linen folds, the other was in an embroidered white tunic, with just a pair of green suede Manolo sandals, flat and rather scuffed, that I knew would have cost at least 500 euro. I was embarrassed that I noticed that, because, of course, a girl like her never would. The men were identikit, thick dark hair falling to their collars, broad-shouldered and slim as though they had never done anything but ski and swim and play tennis, which they probably hadn't. They were – effortless, I decided. Compared with Leanne and myself in our fussy Riviera finery they had an air of belonging which no amount of expensive shopping could ever produce. This is what properly rich people looked like, I thought, like they would never, ever have to try.

I spun my drink out, taking them in, until they wandered off. The girl in the shirt let herself into a building across the square, and a few minutes later appeared on a terrace above the Dior boutique, talking to a maid in a pale pink uniform. Maybe the dinner would be at her house, not that she'd have to shop for it, or cook it, or clear up afterwards. I didn't like these thoughts, they were bitter. I was too used to being on the outside, looking in. The bar was filling up now, a few overdressed American couples, perhaps guests at the Splendido on top of the hill who'd strolled down for an *aperitivo*. I thought about another drink, but the ticket in its tiny saucer already said forty euro. Perhaps I could walk back to Santa on the decked pedestrian path. I put two notes and a couple of coins on the table and got up to leave.

Three huge boats were docked at the right side of the harbour, absurd, like whales in a goldfish bowl. Two crew, in white knee-length shorts and polished leather belts, were letting down a gangplank on one of them, the hugest of the lot. The blunt lines of the hull and the sheen of the finish, like rubberised charcoal, gave it an almost military air, as though it might vanish beneath the waves to transport a James Bond villain to his undersea lair. It was ugly, but certainly impressive. After a minute, two pairs of chunky Nikes appeared, followed by Levi'd legs and garish Polo shirts with huge logos. Both their owners had their phones clamped to their ears, indifferent to their surroundings. I wondered if they even knew where they were. Then I looked again, and saw it was Steve. Steve whose boat I had been on at Antibes just two nights before.

And then something switched. The dreamy, soporific air about me was brusquely charged with an adrenalin kick so sharp I thought the whole piazza must feel it. The soft colours of the square flared into tropical life as I watched the two men approach. My brain fizzed awake, because I had seen, suddenly, what I could do. I took a deep breath and stood slowly. This was what rich people did, wasn't it? They bumped into one another all the time, in St Moritz, in Mégève, on Elba or Pantelleria. I had to act like one of them, airy, casual. I twitched my sunglasses into my bag. They were making for the green-awned restaurant facing the dock. Puny, another famous place I had read about. I timed my walk so that I crossed them diagonally, letting my full skirt swing so that it almost brushed Steve's legs. He was still messaging. I turned, caught his eye.

‘Steve!’

He looked up, and I saw him trying to place me. I stepped forward confidently and kissed him on both cheeks. ‘Lauren. We hung out in Antibes!’

‘Hey, yeah. Lauren? Hi, how are you?’

At least he did seem to genuinely recognise me. I said hi to Thing, Leanne’s Jacuzzi paramour, who turned out to be called Tristan, which I wouldn’t have had him down for.

We stood for an awkward minute. Social chit-chat obviously wasn’t Steve’s thing, but I could not let this go. Steve didn’t know it yet, but he was about to play Sir Lancelot.

‘Great night, wasn’t it?’

‘Yeah, great.’

Oh God, we could be here for decades.

‘My friend, that is, she’s more of an acquaintance really, went back to town. I’ve been staying with some friends – over there.’ I waved my arm vaguely in the direction of the villa-speckled hills. ‘But they’ve left already for Corsica. I’m going back myself tomorrow.’

‘We’ve just got in. We’re planning to take her along the coast – Sardinia,’ proffered Steve.

I acted like he hadn’t already told me that over hot chocolate.

‘Plans for tonight?’ I tried to look flirtatious but not too desperate, though in fact I’d have done them both sideways with the polished crew as cheerleaders if it got me on that boat. Boats jump borders in a way that corpses just don’t.

‘Just checking in with a few people. Why don’t you have dinner with us?’

Don’t rush him, Judith.

‘Well, my stuff’s over at Santa.’

‘You can pick it up later.’

Result.

‘Sure, thanks. I’d love to.’

So Steve ordered a magnum of 95 Dom, which might have impressed me in another life, and two older guys with mahogany cleavages and sullen Estonian mistresses appeared, and we ordered some baby octopus antipasti, which nobody touched but me, and then Steve ordered two bottles of lime-coloured Vermentino, and then a group of Milanese bankers who’d turned up from Forte dei Marmi appeared, and one of them took time out from fawning deferentially over Steve to whizz me back to Santa in his vintage Alfa to collect my bags, and then we had to go to a floating bar at Paraggi where the Estonians did a bit of listless pole dancing and everyone ordered sushi, which no one ate, then it was back to the boat for Cohibas and coke in the hot tub and Steve showing off his underwater stereo system which meant you could listen to Rihanna even while you were swimming in the upper deck pool, if that blew your hair back. I took every glass that was offered and didn’t drink a drop – thanks, Olly – and stayed close to Steve when one of the old walruses reached a proprietorial hand out of the bubbles towards me, and, eventually, lay down meekly in Steve’s huge bed quite ready to sing for my supper if required. But all he did was hold my hand and turn over quietly, and let me sleep in the soft unsteady cradle of the waves.

He was gone in the morning. I sat up, glad of my clear head, and pressed my face to the porthole. Sea and sky. Fuck. I’d done it. There was a tray on the bed, orange juice, a silver coffee pot, scrambled eggs and toast under a silver cover, fruit, yoghurt, croissants. A tiny crystal vase with a single white rose. Today’s

FT, Times, Daily Mail – because everyone reads that. Presumably billionaires had a special press connection, no day-old news for them. I scanned them rapidly; nothing. My bags had been unpacked, my shoes lined up and neatly stuffed with tissue, my few dresses looking forlorn on padded charcoal-silk hangers, each with a striped linen bag of rose petals. I showered in the bathroom, where the double shower and personal sauna made the Eden Roc look a bit basic, knotted up my hair and added a plain grey tee to the briefest of the bikinis I had bought in Santa. In the stateroom, Steve was in shorts, bare chested, chugging coffee from a jumbo Starbucks mug, his eyes travelling over a bank of blinking screens. Currents of money. Through the glass doors to the deck I could see Tristan lifting dumbbells.

‘Hey, babe.’ Babe was good. I wasn’t yet sure how to play this. I didn’t want to be relegated to Estonian slut category, but then I obviously was the kind of girl who hopped a boat with a virtual stranger at a moment’s notice. The kind of girl who checks into a hotel in Santa Margherita for two nights and then disappears, no passports, no tickets, no borders. I let my hands rest briefly on his shoulders, smelling his clean skin and cologne, planted a kiss on his slightly receding hairline.

‘Hey, you.’

‘We’re putting in at Porto Venere tonight.’

‘We’ was also good. Very good.

‘Lovely,’ I answered casually, as though I always spent my summers popping from one exclusive Italian resort town to another. Inside, I was running a victory lap of the deck, punching the air. What’s the appropriate selfie pose when you’ve just got away with manslaughter? But I’m a quick learner, a very quick learner, and I knew that the only way to pull this off was

never for a moment to let it show that I didn't have a fucking clue what I was doing. So I went out to sunbathe, noticing all the same that he didn't give a glance to my tie-sided back view as it swung through the doors.

After lunch – grilled fish, *salsa verde* and fruit served from more old crystal and thick modern china, bright orange, stamped with the boat's name, *Mandarin* – Steve gave me an enthusiastic tour. I inspected the helipad, heard quite a lot about the Russian military-grade casing of the hull, the folding balconies on the sundeck, the sliding glass wall of the stateroom, the extending box release of the passerelle – whatever that was – revisited the Picassos. The crew glided around Steve like pilot fish to his shark, with a kind of trained telepathy that produced a steadying hand in a doorway or a frosted glass of Armani mineral water without a need ever being expressed aloud. Steve introduced his captain, Jan, a stern-looking Norwegian who smiled along professionally with Steve's awkward attempts at mateyness.

'Show her the lights, Jan!'

Jan's tanned forearm brushed mine as he leaned over to flick the switch. A second's flash of erotic Morse code, but that could wait. I peered dutifully over the prow. Despite the sunlight, the dark margin of the waterline was suddenly filled with a pink neon glow. Jan flicked a switch and the illuminations fireworked through orange, cobalt, purple, throbbing diamond white. At night the thing would have looked like a Las Vegas cathouse.

'Great, isn't it! I've just got them.'

There was something endearingly boyish about his enthusiasm, though Jan's opinion of the decorative scheme was visible from Genoa. We inspected the cabins, which apart from the

room which I now seemed to be sharing with Steve were surprisingly poky. When we had finished, Steve showed me his new toy, a personal planetarium installed in the wheelhouse.

‘It has lasers, so you can track the constellations against the real sky.’ Even the stars, here, could be rearranged for pleasure.

‘It’s a shame I won’t see it in action,’ I said hesitantly. ‘You’d probably better drop me off, tonight.’

‘Do you have somewhere to be?’

I looked at him from under my lashes. ‘Not specially.’

‘Why don’t you stay then? We can hang out.’

There was no flirtation in his eyes; I adjusted my own.

‘Sure. I’d love that. Thanks. Is it cool to keep my stuff in your room, though?’

‘No problem.’

So that was that.