

The Master of Knots

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Extract

PROLOGUE

He click of a switch and the dull hum of a hairdryer. Then a stream of hot air and the touch of a brush on sweat-soaked hair. He wanted her to continue looking impeccable. That was the word he had used. For him, everything had to be impeccable. He took care to dab away the saliva that drained from the corners of her mouth, held gaping by a hard rubber ball. A dog's ball.

His cruelty, too, was impeccable. He left no marks on her body, though at times the pain he inflicted was unbearable. But he also knew how to make her come: she had already had two orgasms since the start of their 'session'. That was his word. All her life she had yearned for such an expert dominator and this idea was the only thing that stopped her thinking about death.

He was going to kill her; she was sure of it. Yet she still couldn't quite imagine how. He was in no hurry, and meted out pain with slow, studied movements. Using a system of pulleys, he kept altering her position and with each new move the power of his playful imagination astounded her.

He removed her blindfold and ordered her to look at the object he was holding, saying he had created it specially for her. She obeyed, and in that instant realized she was about to die. Terror took possession of her mind, but only for a

moment. He penetrated her gently and made her climax one more time.

While her body was shaking with pleasure, something enormous and implacable began to make its slow way through her intestines. She attempted to wriggle free but managed only to arch her back. She wished she could die at once, but he wasn't letting her. He was good. He was the best she had ever met.

The cellphone in my shirt pocket vibrated. I continued to stare at the flickering green dot, while I decided what to do. I had too much alcohol in my body to think straight, so I answered it, just to get it off my mind. The deafening music forced me out onto the street.

It was Rudy Scanferla, who worked at my club: he even pretended he owned it. He said some guy had turned up who was in a hurry to talk to me. I replied I would be back the next day and clicked off. It was probably a client, but right then I was in no mood to listen to other people's troubles. I was having a better time than I'd had for years.

I was in the small Tuscan town of Pontedera, at Music Asylum, a store that sold CDs, vinyl and books, and belonged to a friend of mine, Guido Genovesi. We were celebrating, albeit rather belatedly, the birth of his daughter. The fact is I didn't pass that way very often. Four years earlier, I had walked into Music Asylum to buy a Canned Heat record and had found Guido there chatting and sipping aperitifs with a friend of his, Giacomo Minuti. We had taken a good look at one another and that was it: we were friends. After the shop closed we had gone on drinking and chatting in one bar after another, and when the very last landlord had shown us the door, we had climbed into

Giacomo's car and driven to the Piaggio village to watch the sun rise. It was a tight little district, built for the workers and employees of the famous scooter manufacturer which, for better or worse, had transformed the lives of just about everyone in the area. Giacomo had grown up there and reckoned that if you wanted to understand anything about Pontedera, here was the place to start. He was right.

I dropped in on Guido and Giacomo whenever I was in the area. Apart from running Music Asylum, Guido liked to write short stories. Giacomo, on the other hand, had a desk-job at the council offices in Vicopisano. One afternoon he had taken me on a tour of the town's castle and ancient jails. Prisoners there ground down the terracotta tiles of their cell floors, mixed the powder with water and used the resulting reddish paste to write and draw on the walls. I had been struck by the sketch of a steamship that an anarchist from Carrara, one Sirio Belletti, had made, during Fascism. It had made me long to run far, far away.

Giacomo didn't know I had been in prison. He and Guido had never asked me anything about my past, nor about how I made a living. I would have been forced to spin them some yarn about my present circumstances, but I would have told them the truth about my past; that I had spent seven years in prison, accused of terrorist offences. I wouldn't have wasted time explaining I was innocent. A pointless detail in the overall scheme of things. The night I blew my youth away, all I had done was let a guy I didn't know sleep at my flat. Then the cops had turned up, hooded and armed to the teeth. I had never seen the guy again – he was still in prison with a couple of life sentences to serve. I could have beaten the rap, but the judge insisted I recognize some persons I had never seen in my life before and who had done me no harm.

I was an ex-student and former blues singer, and prison had been hard on me. It had dried up my voice and fed a certain obsession with the truth. The kind that the blind-folded goddess of Justice never gets to see. On my release, I had exploited my reputation as someone who could keep his mouth shut and had used the experience I had gained in prison acting as a peacemaker between the various factions of the criminal underworld to carve myself out a profession as an unlicensed detective. It had turned out to be a smart move. Lawyers who needed an entrée into the criminal underworld to get their clients out of trouble were more than happy to come to me for help. My services didn't come cheap, but I almost always managed to stick my nose in the kind of places that investigating magistrates, cops and even ex-cop private investigators couldn't even think of approaching.

Business was brisk. I had bought myself a club just outside Padova. It was open only at night, was a good place to drink and the music was first-rate. Customers referred to it affectionately as La Cuccia, the dog basket. I had bought it because I needed a place where I could receive clients – a table kept permanently reserved in a strategic position from which I could keep an eye on the door, the bar and the stage. On account of my past, I had had to register La Cuccia in the name of Rudy Scanferla, my barman. He had been happy to accept the arrangement, enjoyed boasting about his club to the ladies, and the wages I paid him weren't bad either.

For my investigative work, I had two associates: Beniamino Rossini and Max the Memory. Rossini was a gangster of the old school. His father was from Milan but his mother was a legendary smuggler from the Basque country and it was her footsteps he had first chosen to follow, only later

switching to holding up security vans. After a long interval spent in Italy's prisons, he had returned to cross-border trafficking, specializing in the Dalmatian coast, which he reached by high-speed motorboat. Lately he had been involved in recovering moneys hidden in the most improbable places, on behalf of prisoners unlikely to be released until well after the introduction of the euro, which was scheduled for the 1 January 2002. Beniamino would go and pick up the proceeds from robberies and a variety of other illegal activities – on the strict understanding that neither narcotics nor child pornography had been involved – and would then pass the cash on to the right people to put it back into circulation, so that it could be converted into the new currency. Rossini hung on to twenty per cent of the sums recovered and naturally didn't have to issue receipts. His name, in any case, was as good as any guarantee.

He was rich enough not to need to take any part in my investigations, but the fact is that when we were in prison together saved his life, and ever since he had made quite sure no harm ever came my way. Besides, he relished any kind of adventure. It made him feel alive. He had been married, but he since he was residing at the state's pleasure his wife had betrayed him with his lawyer, abandoning him without a lira. He had taken no revenge and, frankly, I had never understood why.

On his left wrist, Rossini wore a collection of gold bracelets: one for every man he had killed. When it came to violence he was a true professional, using it to administer justice in accordance with the dictates of a gangland code now quite forgotten by the younger generation. Even though he was over sixty, he remained a redoubtable implacable, enemy. Tall, slim, still muscular, elegant, with dyed but thinning hair and a Xavier Cugat moustache,

Beniamino loved nightclubs and the women who frequented them. For the last few years, he had been seeing Sylvie, a French-Algerian bellydancer. It was a relationship typical of the nightclub world – lived from day to day, without any plans for the long term.

My other associate, Max the Memory, had gained his nickname on account of his passion for filing away all kinds of useful information. He had been accused of murder and of membership of an armed gang and had been on the wanted list for years, though in fact he had never left Padova. I had got to know him during one of my investigations, when I had needed information on some major operators who wanted me dead. At that time, Max was using his woman, Marielita, a South-American street artist, to do his spying in the city so he could keep his files updated. One day she was murdered by killers working for the locally based Brenta Mafia, and I was the one who held her in my arms as blood gushed from her belly and mouth. Max had never recovered from that loss and I, for my part, had never got over my sense of guilt, because Marielita and I had once spent a night together. It should never have happened.

Anyway, Max couldn't lie low for ever. They were bound to catch up with him sooner or later; they always did. Rossini and I managed to set up a trade with an anti-Mafia judge. It was the classic approach to justice: first you negotiate and then, when you've struck a deal, you go through all the rigmarole of the trial. In the end, the judge saw it was in his interest to help Max obtain a pardon after a relatively brief stay in jail.

When Max walked out of the gates of Rome's Rebibbia prison, I was there to give him a big hug and invite him to come and live at my place, in an empty flat over the club. He

had accepted and from that day on we had been associates. His years in hiding and the loss of Marielita had left their mark. He spent a lot of time shut up in his study in front of his computer, smoking, drinking beer and grappa, and listening to good music. Prison had also bequeathed him a particular way of cooking. It was a solitary ritual, consisting of slow, measured motions that somehow enabled him to exorcise time and lick his wounds. Having filled the holes in his existence with food, tobacco and alcohol, he was overweight and his fingers were yellow with nicotine. I affectionately called him Fat Max, but never to his face. Max was touchy.

At the end of an investigation that had brought us into head-on conflict with a gang of Colombians, Max had decided to return to political activism. He wasn't content any more just to solve cases. Old Rossini and I had tried to talk him out of it because if he got into any trouble in the five years immediately following his release, his pardon could be revoked. The way things stood, a conviction for fly-posting could get him another fifteen years. He swore he'd be careful.

He had joined the so-called movement of movements, becoming what Italian newspapers refer to as a 'No Global'. He got involved in the fair-trade business, working for a Venice-based consortium of non-profit organizations that imported goods and produce from Africa, Latin America and Asia. There was nothing dangerous or illegal in this, but he had to take care not to lower his guard. The political climate in Italy had changed and anybody who thought that another world was possible was increasingly viewed as an enemy of Western democracy and civilization.

Whatever my misgivings, as a friend I had to feel happy for him. His smile was less sad now and he had recovered

his interest in women. I had invited him to come with me to Pontedera but he had had some meeting to go to. He'd asked me to make a detour and drop in at his favourite pasticceria near Florence, to buy him a supply of good-quality chocolate. I would do that the following day, before returning to Padova and meeting the new client – assuming, that is, he would have the patience to wait for me.

Guido clapped me on the shoulder. 'Time for supper,' he said.

I smiled. I knew what my Tuscan friends meant by supper. We wouldn't be getting up from the table till at least two in the morning.