
The Sinner

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Chapter 1

THEY CALLED HER the Queen of the Dead.

Though no one ever said it to her face, Dr. Maura Isles sometimes heard the nickname murmured in her wake as she traveled the grim triangle of her job between courtroom and death scene and morgue. Sometimes she would detect a note of dark sarcasm: Ha ha, there she goes, our Goth goddess, out to collect fresh subjects. Sometimes the whispers held a tremolo of disquiet, like the murmurs of the pious as an unholy stranger passes among them. It was the disquiet of those who could not understand why she chose to walk in Death's footsteps. Does she enjoy it, they wonder? Does the touch of cold flesh, the stench of decay, hold such allure for her that she has turned her back on the living? They think this cannot be normal, and they cast uneasy glances her way, noting details that only reinforce their beliefs that she is an odd duck. The ivory skin, the black hair with its blunt Cleopatra cut. The red slash of lipstick. Who else wears lipstick to a death scene? Most of all, it's her calmness that disturbs them, her coolly regal gaze as she surveys the horrors that they themselves can barely stomach. Unlike them, she does not avert her gaze. Instead she bends close and stares, touches. She sniffs.

And later, under bright lights in her autopsy lab, she cuts.

She was cutting now, her scalpel slicing through chilled skin, through subcutaneous fat that gleamed a greasy yellow. A man who liked his hamburgers and fries, she thought as she used pruning shears to cut through the ribs and lifted the triangular shield of breastbone the way one opens a cupboard door, to reveal its treasured contents.

The heart lay cradled in its spongy bed of lungs. For fifty-nine years, it had pumped blood through the body of Mr. Samuel Knight. It had grown with him, aged with him, transforming, as he had, from the lean muscle of youth to this well-larded flesh. All pumps eventually fail, and so had Mr. Knight's as he'd sat in his Boston hotel room with the TV turned on and a glass of whiskey from the minibar sitting beside him on the nightstand.

She did not pause to wonder what his final thoughts might have been, or whether he had felt pain or fear. Though she explored his most intimate recesses, though she flayed open his skin and held his heart in her hands, Mr. Samuel Knight remained a stranger to her, a silent and undemanding one, willingly offering up his secrets. The dead are patient. They do not complain, nor threaten, nor cajole.

The dead do not hurt you; only the living do.

She worked with serene efficiency, resecting the thoracic viscera, laying the freed heart on the cutting board. Outside, the first snow of December swirled, white flakes whispering against windows and slithering down alleys. But here in the lab, the only sounds were of running water and the hiss of the ventilator fan.

Her assistant Yoshima moved in uncanny silence, anticipating her requests, materializing wherever she needed him. They had worked together only a year and a half, yet already they functioned like a single organism, linked by the telepathy of two logical minds. She did not need to ask him to redirect the lamp; it was already done, the light shining down on the dripping heart, a pair of scissors held out and waiting for her to take them.

The darkly mottled wall of the right ventricle, and the white apical scar, told her this heart's sad story. An old myocardial infarction, months or even years old, had already destroyed part of the left ventricular wall. Then, sometime in the last twenty-four hours, a fresh infarction had occurred. A thrombus had blocked off the right coronary artery, strangling the flow of blood to the muscle of the right ventricle.

She resected tissue for histology, already knowing what she would see under the microscope. Coagulation and necrosis. The invasion of white cells, moving in like a defending army. Perhaps Mr. Samuel Knight thought the discomfort in his chest was just a bout of indigestion. Too much lunch, shouldn't have eaten all those onions. Maybe Pepto-Bismol would do the trick. Or perhaps there'd been more ominous signs which he chose to ignore: the weight on his chest, the shortness of breath. Surely it did not occur to him that he was having a heart attack.

That, a day later, he would be dead of an arrhythmia.

The heart now lay open and sectioned on the board. She looked at the torso, missing all its organs. So ends your business trip to Boston, she thought. No surprises here. No foul play, except for the abuse you heaped on your own body, Mr. Knight.

The intercom buzzed. "Dr. Isles?" It was Louise, her secretary.

"Yes?"

"Detective Rizzoli's on line two for you. Can you take the call?"

"I'll pick up."

Maura peeled off her gloves and crossed to the wall phone. Yoshima, who'd been rinsing instruments in the sink, shut off the faucet. He turned to watch her with his silent tiger eyes, already knowing what a call from Rizzoli signified.

When at last Maura hung up, she saw the question in his gaze.

"It's starting early today," she said. Then she stripped off her gown and left the morgue, to usher another subject into her realm.

The morning's snowfall had turned into a treacherous mix of both snow and sleet, and the city plows were nowhere in sight. She drove cautiously along Jamaica Riverway, tires swishing through deep slush, windshield wipers scraping at hoarfrosted glass. This was the first winter storm of the season, and drivers had yet to adjust to the conditions. Already, several casualties had slid off the road, and she passed a parked police cruiser, its lights flashing, the patrolman standing beside a tow truck driver as they both gazed at a car that had tipped into a ditch.

The tires of her Lexus began to slide sideways, the front bumper veering toward oncoming traffic. Panicking, she hit the brakes and felt the vehicle's automatic skid control kick into action. She pulled the car back into her lane. Screw this, she thought, her heart thudding. I'm moving back to California. She slowed to a timid crawl, not caring who honked at her or how much traffic she held up. Go ahead and pass me, idiots. I've met too many drivers like you on my slab.