

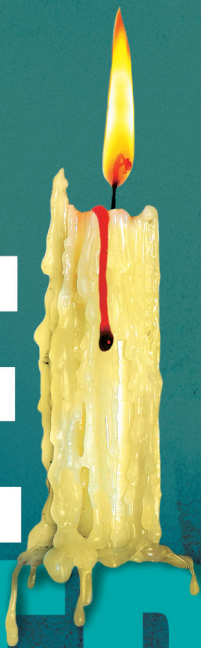
A RIZZOLI & ISLES THRILLER

TESS GERRITSEN

'Absolutely riveting'

MO HAYDER

THE SINNER



HE'LL FIND YOU IN YOUR DARKEST HOUR...



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THE SINNER

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‘A brilliantly compulsive read’

‘Kept me glued to the page’

‘Tess Gerritsen is absolutely
a five-star writer’

‘A nail-biter’

‘Magnificent’

‘Full of suspense from start to finish’

‘Superb’

‘An amazing “edge of the seat” read’

‘Very captivating . . . this book did
not disappoint’

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Detective Jane Rizzoli and Forensic Pathologist Maura Isles are investigating the gruesome murder of a nurse, whilst also protecting a young student from a stalker. But immersed in their day jobs, will they lose sight of something sinister happening much closer to home?

'Absolutely first rate – readers will be thrilled and delighted by this new Rizzoli and Isles outing'

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'This will haunt you. Riveting!'

Shari Lapena

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Bestselling author Tess Gerritsen is also a doctor, and she brings to her novels her first-hand knowledge of emergency and autopsy rooms.

But her interests span far wider than medical topics. As an anthropology undergraduate at Stanford University, she catalogued centuries-old human remains, and she continues to travel the world, driven by her fascination with ancient cultures and bizarre natural phenomena.

Now a full-time novelist, she lives with her husband in Maine.

For more information about Tess Gerritsen and her novels, visit her website at www.tessgerritsen.co.uk

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THE SINNER

TESS GERRITSEN



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To my mother, Ruby J. C. Tom, with love.

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Prologue

*Andhra Pradesh
India*

The driver refused to take him any farther.

A mile back, right after they passed the abandoned Octagon chemical plant, the pavement had given way to an overgrown dirt road. Now the driver complained that his car was getting scraped by underbrush, and with the recent rains, there were muddy spots where their tires could get mired. And where would that leave them? Stranded, 150 kilometers from Hyderabad. Howard Redfield listened to the long litany of objections, and knew they were merely a pretext for the real reason the driver did not wish to proceed. No man easily admits that he is afraid.

Redfield had no choice; from here, he would have to walk.

He leaned forward to speak in the driver's ear, and caught a gamey whiff of the man's sweat. In

the rearview mirror, where rattling beads dangled, he saw the driver's dark eyes staring at him. 'You'll wait here for me, won't you?' Redfield asked. 'Stay right here, on the road.'

'How long?'

'An hour, maybe. As long as it takes.'

'I tell you, there is nothing to see. No one is there anymore.'

'Just wait here, okay? Wait. I'll pay you double when we get back to the city.'

Redfield grabbed his knapsack, stepped out of the air-conditioned car, and was instantly swimming in a sea of humidity. He hadn't worn a knapsack since he was a college kid, wandering through Europe on a shoestring, and it felt a little would-be, at age fifty-one, to be slinging one over his flabby shoulders. But he was damned if he went anywhere in this steamhouse of a country without his bottle of purified drinking water and his insect repellent and his sunscreen and diarrhea medicine. And his camera; he could not leave behind the camera.

He stood sweating in the late afternoon heat, looked up at the sky, and thought: Great, the sun is going down, and all the mosquitoes come out at dusk. Here comes dinner, you little buggers.

He set off down the road. Tall grass obscured the path, and he stumbled into a rut, his walking shoes sinking ankle-deep in mud. Clearly no vehicle had come this way in months, and Mother Nature had quickly moved in to reclaim her territory. He paused, panting and swatting at

insects. Glancing back, he saw that the car was no longer in sight, and that made him uneasy. Could he trust the driver to wait for him? The man had been reluctant to bring him this far, and had grown more and more nervous as they'd bounced along the increasingly rough road. Bad people were out here, the driver had said, and terrible things happened in this area. They could both disappear, and who would bother to come looking for them?

Redfield pressed onward.

The humid air seemed to close in around him. He could hear the water bottle sloshing in his knapsack, and already he was thirsty, but he did not stop to drink. With only an hour or so left of daylight, he had to keep moving. Insects hummed in the grass, and he heard what he thought must be birds calling in the canopy of trees all around him, but it was unlike any birdsong he'd ever heard before. Everything about this country felt strange and surreal, and he trudged in a dreamlike trance, sweat trickling down his chest. The rhythm of his own breathing accelerated with each step. It should be only a mile and a half, according to the map, but he seemed to walk forever, and even a fresh application of insect repellent did not discourage the mosquitoes. His ears were filled with their buzzing, and his face was an itching mask of hives.

He stumbled into another deep rut and landed on his knees in tall grass. Spat out a mouthful of vegetation as he crouched there, catching his

breath, so discouraged and exhausted that he decided it was time to turn around. To get back on that plane to Cincinnati with his tail tucked between his legs. Cowardice, after all, was far safer. And more comfortable.

He heaved a sigh, planted his hand on the ground to push himself to his feet, and went very still, staring down at the grass. Something gleamed there among the green blades, something metallic. It was only a cheap tin button, but at that moment, it struck him as a sign. A talisman. He slipped it in his pocket, rose to his feet, and kept walking.

Only a few hundred feet farther, the road suddenly opened up into a large clearing, encircled by tall trees. A lone structure stood at the far edge, a squat cinder block building with a rusting tin roof. Branches clattered and grass waved in the gentle wind.

This is the place, he thought. This is where it happened.

His breathing suddenly seemed too loud. Heart pounding, he slipped off his knapsack, unzipped it, and pulled out his camera.

Document everything, he thought. Octagon will try to make you out as a liar. They will do everything they can to discredit you, so you have to be ready to defend yourself. You have to prove that you are telling the truth.

He moved into the clearing, toward a heap of blackened branches. Nudging the twigs with his shoe, he stirred up the stench of charred wood.

He backed away, a chill crawling up his spine.

It was the remains of a funeral pyre.

With sweating hands, he took off his lens cap and began to shoot photos. Eye pressed to the viewfinder, he snapped image after image. The burned remains of a hut. A child's sandal, lying in the grass. A bright fragment of cloth, torn from a sari. Everywhere he looked, he saw Death.

He swung to the right, a tapestry of green sweeping past his viewfinder, and was about to click off another photo when his finger froze on the button.

A figure skittered past the edge of the frame.

He lowered the camera from his eye and straightened, staring at the trees. He saw nothing now, only the sway of branches.

There – was that a flash of movement, at the very periphery of his vision? He'd caught only a glimpse of something dark, bobbing among the trees. A monkey?

He had to keep shooting. The daylight was going fast.

He walked past a stone well and crossed toward the tin-roofed building, his pants swishing through grass, glancing left and right as he moved. The trees seemed to have eyes, and they were watching him. As he drew near the building, he saw that the walls were scorched by fire. In front of the doorway was a mound of ashes and blackened branches. Another funeral pyre.

He stepped around it, and looked into the doorway.

At first, he could make out very little in that gloomy interior. Daylight was rapidly fading, and inside, it was even darker, a palette of blacks and grays. He paused for a moment as his eyes adjusted. With growing bewilderment, he registered the glint of fresh water in an earthenware jar. The scent of spices. How could this be?

Behind him, a twig snapped.

He spun around.

A lone figure was standing in the clearing. All around them, the trees had gone still, and even the birds were silent. The figure came toward him, moving with a strange and jerky gait, until it stood only a few feet away.

The camera tumbled from Redfield's hands. He backed away, staring in horror.

It was a woman. And she had no face.

One

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 hoar-frosted 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.

The road took her into Jamaica Plain, a west Boston neighborhood of stately old mansions and broad lawns, of serene parks and river walks. In the summertime, this would be a leafy retreat from the noise and heat of urban Boston, but today, under bleak skies, with winds sweeping across barren lawns, it was a desolate neighborhood.

The address she sought seemed the most forbidding of all, the building set back behind a high stone wall over which a smothering tangle of ivy had scrambled. A barricade to keep out the world, she thought. From the street, all she could see were the gothic peaks of a slate roof and one towering gable window which peered back at her like a dark eye. A patrol car parked near the front gate confirmed that she had found the correct address. Only a few other vehicles had arrived so far – the shock troops before the larger army of crime-scene techs arrived.

She parked across the street and braced herself against the first blast of wind. When she stepped out of the car, her shoe skidded right out from under her, and she barely caught herself, hanging onto the vehicle door. Dragging herself back to her feet, she felt icy water trickle down her calves from the soaked hem of her coat, which had fallen into the slush. For a few seconds she just stood there, sleet stinging her face, shocked by how quickly it had all happened.

She glanced across the street at the patrolman sitting in his cruiser, and saw that he was watching her, and had surely seen her slip. Her pride stung, she grabbed her kit from the front seat, swung the door shut, and made her way, with as much dignity as she could muster, across the rime-slicked road.

‘You okay, Doc?’ the patrolman called out through his car window, a concerned inquiry she really did not welcome.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Watch yourself in those shoes. It’s even more slippery in the courtyard.’

‘Where’s Detective Rizzoli?’

‘They’re in the chapel.’

‘And where’s that?’

‘Can’t miss it. It’s the door with the big cross on it.’

She continued to the front gate, but found it locked. An iron bell hung on the wall; she tugged on the pull rope, and the medieval clang slowly faded into the softer tick, tick of falling sleet. Just beneath the bell was a bronze plaque, its inscription partially obscured by a strand of brown ivy.

Graystones Abbey

The Sisters of Our Lady of Divine Light

‘The harvest is indeed great, but the laborers are few.

Pray, therefore, to send laborers

Into the harvest.’

On the other side of the gate, a woman swathed in black suddenly appeared, her approach so silent that Maura gave a start when she saw the face staring at her through the bars. It was an ancient face, so deeply lined it seemed to be collapsing in on itself, but the eyes were bright and sharp as a bird’s. The nun did not speak, posing her question with only her gaze.

‘I’m Dr. Isles from the Medical Examiner’s office,’ said Maura. ‘The police called me here.’

The gate squealed open.

Maura stepped into the courtyard. 'I'm looking for Detective Rizzoli. I believe she's in the chapel.'

The nun pointed directly across the courtyard. Then she turned and shuffled slowly into the nearest doorway, abandoning Maura to make her own way to the chapel.

Snowflakes whirled and danced amid needles of sleet, like white butterflies circling their lead-footed cousins. The most direct route was to cross the courtyard, but the stones were glazed with ice, and Maura's shoes, with their gripless soles, had already proven no match for such a surface. She ducked instead beneath the narrow covered walkway that ran along the courtyard's perimeter. Though protected from the sleet, she found little shelter here from the wind, which sliced through her coat. She was shocked by the cold, reminded yet again of how cruel December in Boston could be. For most of her life, she had lived in San Francisco, where a glimpse of snowflakes was a rare delight, not a torment, like these stinging nettles that swirled under the overhang to nip her face. She veered closer to the building and hugged her coat tighter as she passed darkened windows. From beyond the gate came the faint swish of traffic on Jamaica Riverway. But here, within these walls, she heard only silence. Except for the elderly nun who had admitted her, the compound seemed abandoned.

So it was a shock when she saw three faces staring at her from one of the windows. The nuns stood in a silent tableau, like darkrobed ghosts

behind glass, watching the intruder make her way deeper into their sanctuary. Their gazes swerved in unison, following her as she moved past.

The entrance to the chapel was draped with a strand of yellow crime scene tape, which had sagged in the doorway and hung crusted with sleet. She lifted the tape to step beneath it and pushed open the door.

A camera flash exploded in her eyes and she froze, the door slowly hissing shut behind her, blinking away the afterimage that had seared her retinas. As her vision cleared, she saw rows of wooden pews, whitewashed walls, and at the front of the chapel, an enormous crucifix hanging above the altar. It was a coldly austere room, its gloom deepened by the stained glass windows, which admitted only a murky smear of light.

‘Hold it right there. Be careful where you step,’ said the photographer.

Maura looked down at the stone floor and saw blood. And footprints – a confusing jumble of them, along with medical debris. Syringe caps and torn wrappings. The leavings of an ambulance crew. But no body.

Her gaze moved in a wider circle, taking in the piece of trampled white cloth lying in the aisle, the splashes of red on the pews. She could see her own breath in this frigid room, and the temperature seemed to drop even colder, her chill deepening as she read the bloodstains, saw the successive splashes moving up the rows of benches, and understood what had happened here.

The photographer began to click off more shots, each one a visual assault on Maura's eyes.

'Hey Doc?' At the front of the chapel, a mop of dark hair popped up as Detective Jane Rizzoli rose to her feet and waved. 'The vic's up here.'

'What about this blood here, by the door?'

'That's from the other victim, Sister Ursula. Med-Q boys took her to St. Francis. There's more blood along that center aisle, and some footprints we're trying to preserve, so you'd better circle around to your left. Stick close to the wall.'

Maura paused to pull on paper shoe-covers, then edged along the perimeter of the room, hugging the wall. Only as she cleared the front row of pews did she see the nun's body, lying faceup, the fabric of her habit a black pool blending into a larger lake of red. Both hands had already been bagged to preserve evidence. The victim's youth took Maura by surprise. The nun who had let her in the gate, and those she had seen through the window, had all been elderly. This woman was far younger. It was an ethereal face, her pale blue eyes frozen in a look of eerie serenity. Her head was bare, the blond hair shorn to barely an inch long. Every terrible blow was recorded in the torn scalp, the misshapen crown.

'Her name's Camille Maginnes. Sister Camille. Hometown, Hyannisport,' said Rizzoli, sounding Dragnet-cool and businesslike. 'She was the first novice they've had here in fifteen years. Planned to take her final vows in May.'

She paused, then added: ‘She was only twenty,’ and her anger cracked through the facade.

‘She’s so young.’

‘Yeah. Looks like he beat the shit out of her.’

Maura pulled on gloves and crouched down to study the destruction. The death instrument had left raggedly linear lacerations on the scalp. Fragments of bone protruded through torn skin, and a clump of gray matter had oozed out. Though the facial skin was largely intact, it was suffused a dark purple.

‘She died facedown. Who turned her onto her back?’

‘The sisters who found her,’ said Rizzoli. ‘They were looking for a pulse.’

‘What time were the victims discovered?’

‘About eight this morning.’ Rizzoli glanced at her watch. ‘Nearly two hours ago.’

‘Do you know what happened? What did the sisters tell you?’

‘It’s been hard getting anything useful out of them. There are only fourteen nuns left now, and they’re all in a state of shock. Here they think they’re safe. Protected by God. And then some lunatic breaks in.’

‘There are signs of forced entry?’

‘No, but it wouldn’t be all that hard to get into the compound. There’s ivy growing all over the walls – you could hop right over without too much trouble. And there’s also a back gate, leading to a field, where they have their gardens. A perp could get in that way, too.’

‘Footprints?’

‘A few in here. But outside, they’d be pretty much buried under snow.’

‘So we don’t know that he actually broke in. He could have been admitted through that front gate.’

‘It’s a cloistered order, Doc. No one’s allowed inside the gates except for the parish priest, when he comes in to say Mass and hear confession. And there’s also a lady who works in the rectory. They let her bring her little girl when she can’t get child care. But that’s it. No one else comes in without the Abbess’s approval. And the sisters stay inside. They leave only for doctors’ appointments and family emergencies.’

‘Who have you spoken to so far?’

‘The Abbess, Mother Mary Clement. And the two nuns who found the victims.’

‘What did they tell you?’

Rizzoli shook her head. ‘Saw nothing, heard nothing. I don’t think the others will be able to tell us much, either.’

‘Why not?’

‘Have you seen how old they are?’

‘It doesn’t mean they don’t have their wits about them.’

‘One of them’s gorked out by a stroke and two of them have Alzheimer’s. Most of them sleep in rooms facing away from the courtyard, so they wouldn’t have seen a thing.’

At first Maura simply crouched over Camille’s body, not touching it. Granting the victim a last moment of dignity. Nothing can hurt you now, she

thought. She began to palpate the scalp, and felt the crunch of shifting bone fragments beneath the skin. ‘Multiple blows. All of them landed on the crown or the back of the skull . . .’

‘And the facial bruising? Is that just lividity?’

‘Yes. And it’s fixed.’

‘So the blows came from behind. And above.’

‘The attacker was probably taller.’

‘Or she was down on her knees. And he was standing over her.’

Maura paused, hands touching cool flesh, arrested by the heartbreaking image of this young nun, kneeling before her attacker, blows raining down on her bowed head.

‘What kind of bastard goes around beating up nuns?’ said Rizzoli. ‘What the fuck is wrong with this world?’

Maura winced at Rizzoli’s choice of words. Though she couldn’t remember the last time she’d set foot in a church, and had ceased believing years ago, to hear such profanity in a sanctified place disturbed her. Such was the power of childhood indoctrination. Even she, for whom saints and miracles were now merely fantasies, would never utter a curse in full view of the cross.

But Rizzoli was too angry to care what words came tumbling out of her mouth, even in this sacred place. Her hair was more disheveled than usual, a wild, black mane glistening with melted sleet. The bones of her face jutted out in sharp angles beneath pale skin. In the gloom of the chapel, her eyes were bright coals, lit with rage.

Righteous anger had always been Jane Rizzoli's fuel, the essence of what drove her to hunt monsters. Today, though, she seemed feverish with it, and her face was thinner, as though the fire was now consuming her from within.

Maura did not want to feed those flames. She kept her voice dispassionate, her questions businesslike. A scientist dealing in facts, not emotions.

She reached for Sister Camille's arm and tested the elbow joint. 'It's flaccid. No rigor mortis.'

'Less than five, six hours then?'

'It's also cold in here.'

Rizzoli gave a snort, exhaling a puff of vapor in the frigid air. 'No kidding.'

'Just above freezing, I'd guess. Rigor mortis would be delayed.'

'How long?'

'Almost indefinitely.'

'What about her face? The fixed bruising?'

'Livor mortis could have happened within half an hour. It doesn't help us all that much with time of death.'

Maura opened her kit and set out the chemical thermometer to measure ambient temperature. She eyed the victim's many layers of clothing and decided not to take a rectal temperature until after the body had been transported to the morgue. The room was poorly lit – not a place in which she could adequately rule out sexual assault prior to the insertion of the thermometer. Wrestling off clothes might also dislodge trace evidence. Instead

she took out syringes to withdraw vitreous fluid for postmortem potassium levels. It would give her one estimate for time of death.

‘Tell me about the other victim,’ Maura said as she pierced the left eye and slowly withdrew vitreous fluid into the syringe.

Rizzoli gave a groan of disgust at the procedure and turned away. ‘The vic found by the door was Sister Ursula Rowland, sixty-eight years old. Must be a tough old bird. They said she was moving her arms when they loaded her into the ambulance. Frost and I got here just as they were driving away.’

‘How badly injured was she?’

‘I didn’t see her. Latest report we got from St. Francis Hospital is that she’s in surgery. Multiple skull fractures and bleeding into the brain.’

‘Like this victim.’

‘Yeah. Like Camille.’ The anger was back in Rizzoli’s voice.

Maura rose to her feet and stood shivering. Her trousers had absorbed freezing water from the soaked hem of her coat, and her calves felt encased in ice. She had been told on the phone that the death scene was indoors, so she had not brought her scarf or wool gloves from the car. This unheated room was scarcely warmer than the sleet-swept courtyard outside. She shoved her hands into her coat pockets, and wondered how Rizzoli, who was also without warm gloves and scarf, could linger so long in this frigid chapel. Rizzoli seemed to carry her own heat source

within her, the fever of her outrage, and although her lips were turning blue, she did not seem in a hurry to seek a warmer room anytime soon.

‘Why is it so cold in here?’ asked Maura. ‘I can’t imagine they’d want to hold Mass in this room.’

‘They don’t. This part of the building’s never used in winter – it’s too expensive to heat. There are so few of them still living here, anyway. For Mass, they use a small chapel off the rectory.’

Maura thought of the three nuns she’d seen through the window, all of them elderly. These sisters were dying flames, flickering out one by one.

‘If this chapel’s not used,’ she said, ‘what were the victims doing in here?’

Rizzoli gave a sigh, exhaling a dragon’s breath of vapor. ‘No one knows. The Abbess says the last time she saw Ursula and Camille was at prayers last night, around nine. When they didn’t appear at morning prayers, the sisters went looking for them. They never expected to find them in here.’

‘All these blows to the head. It looks like sheer rage.’

‘But look at her face,’ said Rizzoli, pointing to Camille. ‘He didn’t hit her face. He spared her face. That makes it seem a lot less personal. As if he’s not swinging at her specifically, but at what she is. What she stands for.’

‘Authority?’ said Maura. ‘Power?’

‘Funny. I would have said something along the lines of faith, hope, and charity.’

‘Well, I went to a Catholic high school.’

‘You?’ Rizzoli gave a snort. ‘Never would’ve guessed.’

Maura took a deep breath of chilly air and looked up at the cross, remembering her years at Holy Innocents Academy. And the special torments meted out by Sister Magdalene, who had taught history. The torment had not been physical but emotional, dispensed by a woman who was quick to identify which girls had, in her opinion, an unseemly excess of confidence. At the age of fourteen, Maura’s best friends had not been people, but books. She’d easily mastered all her classwork, and had been proud of it, too. That was what had brought Sister Magdalene’s wrath down upon her shoulders. For Maura’s own good, that unholy pride in her own intellect needed to be beaten into humility. Sister Magdalene went about the task with vicious gusto. She had held Maura up to ridicule in class, had written cutting comments in the margins of her immaculate papers, and sighed loudly whenever Maura raised her hand to ask a question. In the end, Maura had been reduced to conquered silence.

‘They used to intimidate me,’ said Maura. ‘The nuns.’

‘I didn’t think anything scared you, Doc.’

‘Lots of things scare me.’

Rizzoli laughed. ‘Just not dead bodies, huh?’

‘There are far scarier things in this world than dead bodies.’

They left the body of Camille lying on her bed

of cold stone and moved back around the room's perimeter, toward the bloodstained floor where Ursula had been found, still alive. The photographer had completed his work and departed; only Maura and Rizzoli remained in the chapel, two lone women, their voices echoing off stark walls. Maura had always thought of chapels as universal sanctuaries, where even the spirit of the unbeliever might be comforted. But she found no comfort in this bleak place, where Death had walked, contemptuous of holy symbols.

'They found Sister Ursula right here,' said Rizzoli. 'She was lying with her head pointed toward the altar, her feet toward the door.'

As though prostrating herself before the crucifix.

'This guy's a fucking animal,' said Rizzoli, the angry words clipped off like shards of ice. 'That's what we're dealing with. Out of his mind. Or some coked-up asshole looking for something to steal.'

'We don't know it's a man.'

Rizzoli waved toward the body of Sister Camille. 'You think a woman did that?'

'A woman can swing a hammer. Crush a skull.'

'We found a footprint. There, halfway up the aisle. Looked to me like a man's size twelve.'

'One of the ambulance crew?'

'No, you can see the Med-Q team's footprints here, near the door. That one in the aisle's different. That one's *his*.'

The wind blew, rattling the windows, and the

door creaked as though invisible hands were tugging at it, desperate to get in. Rizzoli's lips had chilled to blue, and her face had taken on a corpse-like pallor, but she showed no intention of seeking a warmer room. That was Rizzoli, too stubborn to be the first to capitulate. To admit she had reached her limit.

Maura looked down at the stone floor where Sister Ursula had been lying, and she could not disagree with Rizzoli's instincts, that this attack was an act of insanity. This was madness she saw here, in these bloodstains. In the blows slammed into Sister Camille's skull. Either madness, or evil.

An icy draft seemed to blow straight up her spine. She straightened, shivering, and her gaze fixed on the crucifix. 'I'm freezing,' she said. 'Can we get warm somewhere? Get a cup of coffee?'

'Are you finished here?'

'I've seen what I need to. The autopsy will tell us the rest.'

Two

They emerged from the chapel, stepping over the strand of police tape which by now had fallen from the doorway and lay encased in ice. The wind flapped their coats and whipped their faces as they headed beneath the walkway, their eyes narrowed against rebel gusts of snowflakes. As they stepped into a gloomy entranceway, Maura registered barely a whisper of warmth against her numb face. She smelled eggs and old paint and the mustiness of an ancient heating system, radiating dust.

The clatter of chinaware drew them down a dim hallway, into a room awash in fluorescent light, a disconcertingly modern detail. It glared down, stark and unflattering, on the deeply lined faces of the nuns seated around a battered rectory table. Thirteen of them – an unlucky number. Their attention was focused on squares of bright floral cloth and silk ribbons and trays of dried lavender and rose petals. Craft time, thought Maura, watching as arthritic hands scooped up herbs and

wound ribbon around sachets. One of the nuns sat slumped in a wheelchair. She was tilted to the side, her left hand curled into a claw on the armrest, her face sagging like a partly melted mask. The cruel aftermath of a stroke. Yet she was the first to notice the two intruders, and she gave a moan. The other sisters looked up, turning toward Maura and Rizzoli.

Gazing into those wizened faces, Maura was startled by the frailty she saw there. These were not the stern images of authority she remembered from her girlhood, but the gazes of the bewildered, looking to her for answers to this tragedy. She was uneasy with her new status, the way a grown child is uneasy when he first realizes that he and his parents have reversed roles.

Rizzoli asked, 'Can someone tell me where Detective Frost is?'

The question was answered by a harried-looking woman who had just come out of the adjoining kitchen, carrying a tray of clean coffee cups and saucers. She was dressed in a faded blue jumper stained with grease, and a tiny diamond glinted through the bubbles of dishwater on her left hand. Not a nun, thought Maura, but the rectory employee, tending to this ever more infirm community.

'He's still talking to the Abbess,' the woman said. She cocked her head toward the doorway, and a strand of brown hair came loose, curling over her frown-etched forehead. 'Her office is down the hall.'

Rizzoli nodded. 'I know the way.'

They left the harsh light of that room and continued down the hallway. Maura felt a draft here, a whisper of chill air, as though a ghost had just slipped past her. She did not believe in the afterlife, but when walking in the footsteps of those who had recently died, she sometimes wondered if their passing did not leave behind some imprint, some faint disturbance of energy that could be sensed by those who followed.

Rizzoli knocked on the Abbess's door, and a tremulous voice said: 'Come in.'

Stepping into the room, Maura smelled the aroma of coffee, as delicious as perfume. She saw dark wood paneling and a simple crucifix mounted on the wall above an oak desk. Behind that desk sat a stooped nun whose eyes were magnified to enormous blue pools by her glasses. She appeared every bit as old as her frail sisters seated around the rectory table, and her glasses looked so heavy they might pitch her face-forward onto her desk. But the eyes gazing through those thick lenses were alert and bright with intelligence.

Rizzoli's partner, Barry Frost, at once set down his coffee cup and rose to his feet out of politeness. Frost was the equivalent of everybody's kid brother, the one cop in the homicide unit who could walk into an interrogation room and make a suspect believe Frost was his best friend. He was also the one cop in the unit who never seemed to mind working with the mercurial Rizzoli, who even now was scowling at his cup of coffee, no

doubt registering the fact that while she had been shivering in the chapel, her partner was sitting comfortably in this heated room.

‘Reverend Mother,’ said Frost, ‘This is Dr. Isles, from the Medical Examiner’s office. Doc, this is Mother Mary Clement.’

Maura reached for the Abbess’s hand. It was gnarled, the skin like dry paper over bones. As she shook it, Maura spotted a beige cuff peeking out from under the black sleeve. So this was how the nuns tolerated such a cold building. Beneath her woollen habit, the Abbess was wearing long underwear.

Distorted blue eyes gazed at her through thick lenses. ‘The Medical Examiner’s office? Does that mean you’re a physician?’

‘Yes. A pathologist.’

‘You study causes of death?’

‘That’s right.’

The Abbess paused, as though gathering the courage to ask the next question. ‘Have you already been inside the chapel? Have you seen . . .’

Maura nodded. She wanted to cut off the question she knew was coming, but she was incapable of rudeness to a nun. Even at the age of forty, she was still unnerved by the sight of a black habit.

‘Did she . . .’ Mary Clement’s voice slipped to a whisper. ‘Did Sister Camille suffer greatly?’

‘I’m afraid I have no answers yet. Not until I complete the . . . examination.’ *Autopsy* was what she meant, but the word seemed too cold, too

clinical, for Mary Clement's sheltered ears. Nor did she want to reveal the terrible truth: That in fact, she had a very good idea of what had happened to Camille. Someone had confronted the young woman in the chapel. Someone had pursued her as she fled in terror up the aisle, wrenching off her white novice's veil. As his blows avulsed her scalp, her blood had splashed the pews, yet she had staggered onward, until at last she stumbled to her knees, conquered at his feet. Even then her attacker did not stop. Even then, he had kept swinging, crushing her skull like an egg.

Avoiding Mary Clement's eyes, Maura briefly lifted her gaze to the wooden cross mounted on the wall behind the desk, but that imposing symbol was no more comfortable for her to confront.

Rizzoli cut in, 'We haven't seen their bedrooms yet.' As usual, she was all business, focusing only on what needed to be done next.

Mary Clement blinked back tears. 'Yes. I was about to take Detective Frost upstairs to their chambers.'

Rizzoli nodded. 'We're ready when you are.'

The Abbess led the way up a stairway illuminated only by the glow of daylight through a stained glass window. On bright days, the sun would have painted the walls with a rich palette of colors, but on this wintry morning, the walls were murky with shades of gray.

'The upstairs rooms are mostly empty now.'