

'Awesomely accomplished . . .
the plot twists and grips like
an octopus' Daily Telegraph



The
Sculptress

**MINETTE
WALTERS**

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

The Sculptress

by

Minette Walters

Also by Minette Walters

THE SCULPTRESS. THE SCOLD'S BRIDLE.

THE DARK ROOM. THE ECHO.

THE

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For Roland and Philip

"Truth lies within a little and certain compass, but error is immense.

HENRY ST JOHN, VISCOUNT BOLINGBROKE

"It was the feeling that the great, deadly, pointing forefinger of society was pointing at me and the great voice of millions chanting, "Shame.

Shame. Shame." It's society's way of dealing with someone different."

KEN KESEY

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest "Wax Sculpture Malice and superstition were also expressed in the formation of wax images of hated persons, into the bodies of which long pins were thrust in the hope that deadly injury would be induced in the person represented. Belief in this form of black magic never died out completely."

PROLOGUE

Dawlington Evening Herald, January, 1988

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS FOR BRUTAL MURDERS

At Winchester Crown Court yesterday, Olive Martin, 23, of 22 Leven Road, Dawlington, was sentenced to life imprisonment for the brutal murders of her mother and sister, with a recommendation that she serve twenty-five years. The judge, who referred to Martin as 'a monster without a grain of humanity', said that nothing could excuse the savagery she had shown to two defenceless women. The murder of a mother by her daughter was the most unnatural of crimes and demanded the strongest penalty that the law could impose. The murder of a sister by a sister was no less heinous.

"Martin's butchery of the bodies," he went on, 'was an unforgivable and barbarous desecration that will rank in the annals of crime as an act of supreme evil.' Martin showed no emotion as sentence was passed...

ONE

it was impossible to see her approach without a shudder of distaste.

She was a grotesque parody of a woman, so fat that her feet and hands and head protruded absurdly from the huge slab of her body like tiny disproportionate afterthoughts. Dirty blonde hair clung damp and thin to her scalp, black patches of sweat spread beneath her armpits.

Clearly, walking was painful. She shuffled forward on the insides of her feet, legs forced apart by the thrust of one gigantic thigh against another, balance precarious. And with every movement, however small, the fabric of her dress strained ominously as the weight of her flesh shifted. She had, it seemed, no redeeming features. Even her eyes, a deep blue, were all but lost in the ugly folds of pitted white lard.

Strange that after so long she was still an object of curiosity. People who saw her every day watched her progress down that corridor as if for the first time. What was it that fascinated them? The sheer size of a woman who stood five feet eleven and weighed over twenty-six stones?

Her reputation? Disgust? There were no smiles. Most watched impassively as she passed, fearful perhaps of attracting her attention.

She had carved her mother and sister into little pieces and rearranged the bits in bloody abstract on her kitchen floor. Few who saw her could forget it. In view of the horrific nature of the crime and the fear that her huge brooding figure had instilled in everyone who had sat in the courtroom she had been sentenced to life with a recommendation that she serve a minimum of twenty-five years. What made her unusual, apart from the crime itself, was that she had pleaded guilty and refused to offer a defence.

She was known inside the prison walls as the Sculptress. Her real name was Olive Martin.

Rosalind Leigh, waiting by the door of the interview room, ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth. Her revulsion was immediate as if Olive's evil had reached out and touched her. My God, she was thinking, and the thought alarmed her, I can't go through with this.

But she had, of course, no choice. The gates of the prison were locked on her, as a visitor, just as securely as they were locked on the inmates. She pressed a shaking hand to her thigh where the muscles were jumping uncontrollably. Behind her, her all but empty briefcase, a testament to her lack of preparation for this meeting, screamed derision at her if I-considered assumption that conversation with Olive could develop like any other. It had never occurred to her, not for one moment, that fear might stifle her inventiveness.

Lizzie Borden took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one. The rhyme churned in her brain, over and over, numbingly repetitive. Olive Martin took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw what she had done she

gave her sister forty-one... Roz stepped away from the door and forced herself to smile.

"Hello, Olive. I'm Rosalind Leigh. Nice to meet you at last." She held out her hand and shook the other's warmly, in the hope, perhaps, that by demonstrating an unprejudiced friendliness she could quell her dislike. Olive's touch was token only, a brief brush of unresponsive fingers.

"Thank you." Roz spoke to the hovering prison officer briskly.

"I'll take it from here. We have the Governor's permission to talk for an hour." Lizzie Borden took an axe... Tell her you've changed your mind. Olive Martin took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks... I can't go through with this!

The uniformed woman shrugged.

"OK." She dropped the welded metal chair she was carrying carelessly on to the floor and steadied it against her knee.

"You'll need this. Anything else in there will collapse the minute she sits on it." She laughed amiably. An attractive woman.

"She got wedged in the flaming toilet last year and it took four men to pull her out again.

You'd never get her up on your own."

Roz manoeuvred the chair awkwardly through the doorway.

She felt at a disadvantage, like the friend of warring partners being pressured into taking sides. But Olive intimidated her in a way the prison officer never could.

"You will see me using a tape-recorder during this interview," she snapped, nervousness clipping the words brusquely.

"The Governor has agreed to it. I trust that's in order."

There was a short silence. The prison officer raised an eyebrow.

"If you say so. Presumably someone's taken the trouble to get the Sculptress's agreement. Any problems, like, for example, she objects violently' she drew a finger across her throat before tapping the pane of glass beside the door which allowed the officers a clear view of the room 'then bang on the window. Assuming she lets you, of course." She smiled coolly.

"You've read the rules, I hope. You bring nothing in for her, you take nothing out. She can smoke your cigarettes in the interview room but she can't take any away with her. You do not pass messages for her, in or out, without the Governor's permission. If in doubt about anything, you refer it to one of the officers. Clear?"

Bitch, thought Roz angrily.

"Yes, thank you." But it wasn't anger she felt, of course, it was fear. Fear of being shut up in a confined space with this monstrous creature who stank of fat woman's sweat and showed no emotion in her grotesquely bloated face.

"Good." The officer walked away with a broad wink at a colleague.

Roz stared after her.

"Come in, Olive." She chose the chair furthest from the door deliberately. It was a statement of confidence. She was so damn nervous she needed a wee.

The idea for the book had been delivered as an ultimatum by her agent.

"Your publisher is about to wash his hands of you, Roz. His precise words were, "She has a week to commit herself to something that will sell or I shall remove her from our lists." And, though I hate to rub your nose in it, I am within a whisker of doing the same thing." Iris's face softened a little.

Berating Roz, she felt, was like beating your head against a brick wall, painful and completely ineffective. She was, she knew, the woman's best friend her only friend, she thought sometimes. The barrier of barbed wire

that Roz had erected around herself had deterred all but the most determined. People rarely even asked after her these days. With an inward sigh, Iris threw caution to the winds.

"Look, sweetheart, you really can't go on like this. It's unhealthy to shut yourself away and brood.

Did you think about what I suggested last time?"

Roz wasn't listening.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, her eyes maddeningly vacant. She saw the irritation on Iris's face and forced herself to concentrate. Iris, she thought, had been lecturing again. But really, Roz wondered, why did she bother?

Other people's concern was so exhausting, for her and for them.

"Did you ring that psychiatrist I recommended?" Iris demanded bluntly.

"No, there's no need. I'm fine." She studied the immaculately made-up face, which had changed very little in fifteen years.

Someone had once told Iris Fielding that she looked like Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra.

"A week's too short," Roz said, referring to her publisher.

"Tell him a month."

Iris flicked a piece of paper across her desk.

"You've run out of room to manoeuvre, I'm afraid. He's not even prepared to give you a choice of subject. He wants Olive Martin.

Here's the name and address of her solicitor. Find out why she wasn't sent to Broadmoor or Rampton. Find out why she refused to offer a defence. And find out what made her commit the murders in the first place. There's a story there somewhere." She watched the frown on Roz's face deepen and shrugged.

"I know. It's not your sort of thing, but you've brought this on yourself. I've been pressing you for months to produce an outline. Now it's this or nothing. To tell you the truth, I think he's done it on purpose. If you write it, it will sell, if you refuse to write it because it's pure sensationalism, then he's found a good excuse to drop you."

Roz's reaction surprised her.

"OK," she said mildly, taking the piece of paper and tucking it into her handbag.

"I thought you'd refuse."

"Why?"

"Because of the way the tabloids sensationalized what happened to you."

Roz shrugged.

"Maybe it's time someone showed them how to handle human tragedy with dignity." She wouldn't write it, of course she had no intention of writing anything any more but she gave Iris an encouraging smile.

"I've never met a murderess before."

Roz's application to visit Olive Martin for the purposes of research was passed on by the Prison Governor to the Home Office. It was several weeks before permission was given in a grudging processed letter from a civil servant. While Martin had consented to the visits, she reserved the right at any time to withdraw consent, without reason and without prejudice. It was emphasized that the visits had been authorized only on the understanding that there would be no breaches of the prison regulations, that the Governor's word would be final in all circumstances, and that Ms Leigh would be held liable should she contribute in any way to an undermining of prison discipline.

Roz found it hard to look at Olive. Good manners and the Woman's ugliness precluded staring and the monstrous face was so flat, so unresponsive, that

her eyes kept sliding off it like butter off a baked potato. Olive, for her part, watched Roz greedily. Attractive looks put no such limitations on staring quite the reverse, they invite it and Roz was, in any case, a novelty. Visitors were rare in Olive's life, particularly ones who came without the reforming baggage of missionary zeal.

After the cumbersome business of getting her seated, Roz gestured towards the tape-recorder.

"If you remember, I mentioned in my second letter that I'd like to record our chats. I presumed when the Governor gave permission for it that you'd agreed." Her voice was pitched too high.

Olive shrugged a kind of acquiescence.

"You've no objections, then?"

A shake of the head.

"Fine. I'm switching on now. Date, Monday, April twelve.

Conversation with Olive Martin." She consulted her all too sketchy list of questions.

"Let's start with some factual details.

When were you born?"

No answer.

Roz looked up with an encouraging smile, only to be confronted by the woman's unblinking scrutiny.

"Well," she said, "I think I have that detail already. Let's see.

Eighth of September, nineteen sixty-four, which makes you twenty-eight.

Am I right?"