
BREAK MY CHAINS

NICOLINA MARTIN

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-941-1
Print ISBN: 978-1-61258-860-5

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Dedicated to my patient and amazing daughters: Amanda, Olivia, and Agnes.

Part I

Chapter 1

Martin Garrett, convicted five years ago almost to the day for committing a heinous series of murders between 2011 and 2013, escaped this morning from Penitentiary Florence High. The details of his escape have not been revealed. Garrett is considered extremely dangerous and caution is recommended. If anyone sees this man...

THE WHISTLING from the water kettle drowns out the rest. I'm leaning my elbows on the kitchen counter, staring out the frosted window. A thick layer of snow has covered everything during the night. It's so white from where I'm standing; I can't even make out the shapes of the outside world. It's like someone wrapped a large sheet around my house. I'm not entirely taken by surprise. It's my second winter here and it gets really cold, and really wintery in Colorado. The difference between Arizona and where I live now couldn't be greater. Sighing, I move away from the window and take the kettle off the stove. The whistling fades and comes to a stop. They forecasted snow. I don't think I listened well enough. Pouring the boiling water in the cup, I watch it turn black as the instant coffee dissolves. I stare vacantly at the mug,

my thoughts sprawling in every different direction. I need to locate the shovel and find my truck under those masses. I have cans but not a lot of fresh food, so I really need to go into town if I still want bread, milk, eggs, cheese and... I look around me. Fruit. Grimacing, I grab the cup and head off into the living room, which also doubles as office, dining area and hallway. That'd be 'quadruples as', I think as I sink down on the chair and set the cup on the table.

As I flip open the lid to my old MacBook it chimes pleasantly, and I realize I forgot to shut it down last night. Again. I yawn, stretch and glance at the clock on the wall. Twenty past nine. The morning passes too quickly and I need to get some work done. I'm helping a local store with some images for marketing, a newspaper ad, some flyers and whatnot. I've strayed far, far away from the exhibition at the Etherton Gallery I had when I was twenty-one. When I was young and 'promising'.

Three years ago.

What happened then was a nightmare I am still trying to wake up from. Pushing the thoughts away, I click on the folder for Farman's Fishing Lodge. I trekked the woods day in and day out, walking along the river, catching the fine rainbow-colored mist as the water slammed against the rocks in its path downstream. The pictures turned out fantastic. Local flora and fauna, fishermen standing in their yellow pants, the color reflected in the calm surface, sun glittering in tiny ripples. For a few days I was really happy with my choice to move here. The fresh air, the smell of approaching snow, the sometimes near-silence out there.

The tranquility only lasts moments before I return to myself, but I cherish them.

I start sorting the images: by motifs, by colors, by how the sky and the ground harmonize with each other. Choosing a few I intend to show Mr. Waltman, I copy them and begin to toy around with effects.

As I lose myself in work, I don't register how many hours

pass until I notice the corners of the room are darker and that my stomach aches. I study the processed images on the screen. Several of them are everything he asked for, and I hope my client will see it as well. I need the money. Desperately. I stand, straighten my back, and stretch my arms until my hands almost touch the low ceiling, then I close my laptop and head for the kitchen to see if I can find anything that appeals to me.

Armed with canned soup I heated in the microwave, and a bottle of beer, I sink down on the couch and turn the TV back on. I doubt anything interesting has happened in my little corner of the world.

Terrorist attacks in Europe. A gas line leaking in Russia. Price of oil increasing. Some prisoner on the run.

I eat and keep flipping through the channels until I give up and resort to watching a cop show that doesn't crave my attention. Everything is very dramatic, with shaky camera movements, flashing blue and red lights, men screaming when they're pushed to the ground, women screaming when their men are pushed to the ground. I study the handiwork of the cameraman. It looks sloppy and haphazard, but he's really clever in how he switches between objects and with the angles he chooses. I like being surprised by a random TV show.

Dropping the spoon on the table next to the bowl, I lean against the backrest, and stare at the ceiling. It's made of pine boards, yellowed with age, giving the cabin a dark and moody feel. Then and there I decide to paint it when I get the money from this gig. A soft white should go well with the dark hardwood floor and the cute floral patterns on my couch and armchair. I rub my face and glance out the window. It's not dark yet and I need to get some of the snow off my porch and make a path to my truck. There's at least thirty feet to plow to get to the truck, then I have to keep shoveling until I get to where my yard meets the road. I doubt they'll plow it today, though. Shit. Probably not tomorrow either.

I down the rest of the soup but leave the beer, then I rise. Jack, who's been sleeping on his rug in the corner, immediately starts panting. He lifts a thick, furry eyebrow and watches me carefully under a heavy, barely open eyelid. Am I going where he thinks I'm going? When I lift a foot to put it in my boot he realizes that yes, I am indeed. Giving off a robust bark, he jumps up with ease, despite his huge body, and trots toward me, his tail wagging eagerly. He puts his snout against the back of my knee and pushes, looking at me pleadingly. I rub him behind an ear as I push my foot into the other boot and tie it.

"Did you think I'd forget you, silly dog?" Grabbing my jacket, I pat my thigh. "Come on!"

Jack doesn't need to be told twice and lays his paws on the door, reaching up level with my face. He was such a cute little puppy when I took him in, having been abandoned when his former owner died, but Bernese Mountain dogs don't stay small. He's my company, my only friend, and my protection. Our long walks every day have healed me somewhat over the year I've had him.

As I pull down the handle, he pushes at the door, but is met by resistance. I frown and help him, slowly opening the slit until it is wide enough for us to squeeze through.

With a loud groan I take in the massive cover of snow. It's gotta be a foot deep. Or more. It's beautiful. Pure and untouched. But it needs to go.

"Get out there, boy," I tell Jack and he jumps straight out, giving out a squeal of surprise when the cold white layer hits his belly. I laugh, push the door closed and go in search of the shovel.

After forty minutes there's a narrow path to the truck, and a visible front window and driver's door. I've had to shove Jack off me over and over, him thinking it's a game. Panting, and drenched in sweat, I lean on the shovel and study my handiwork, then I lift my gaze to the prematurely darkening sky. The clouds

are a heavy dark blue. Menacing. More snow is on the way. Much more. Fuck. I clutch at my burning chest. I'm exhausted, in need of a shower, a good book in front of the fireplace, and then sleep. I pray my hard work won't be undone come morning.

I call for Jack who is happily jumping around at the edge of the forest and go inside. Pulling the door shut throws us into semi-darkness. Before I head for the bathroom I start a fire. Crumpling pages of old newspapers into little balls, I push them between perfectly dry logs and light them up. Soon orange flames lick the wood, charring it, creating beautiful gleaming serpentine around the edges. I put the cast iron mesh in front of the fireplace, and head for my well-deserved shower.

When I get back out Jack is restless and whining. He paces the room, and starts circling me as soon as he spots me. I have a towel wrapped around my body and dab my hair with another.

"What is it, sweetie?" I crouch in front of him, rub the thick fur on his neck and look around, but nothing seems out of the ordinary. The room has that good, dry warmth that only comes from a lit fireplace. Despite that, a shiver runs through me, and I quickly put on a pair of sweatpants and a flannel shirt. I postpone my own pleasure a little longer and go to give Jack some fresh food. It seems to calm him and soon he guzzles down the canned meat with his usual sloppiness, tail wagging. I give him a pat and, finally, I can sit down again with the intent to do absolutely nothing for the rest of the night. I turn the TV back on and flip through the channels, but then I just mute it and look at the fire instead, drinking my lukewarm beer.

I nearly fly through the roof when Jack suddenly howls, barks, then howls again. He runs to the front door, then back, then in circles. I stand, the hair rising on the back of my neck.

"Jack, boy, what is it?"

He looks at me and whines, crouching, his tail between his legs. Then he jumps up again and runs toward the door, barking.

“Enough!” I go to him and grab the loose skin at his neck, crouching before him as I glance at the silent door. “Shh!”

He’s quiet, but on high alert. I’m quiet too, also on high alert. Holding my breath, I listen intently but hear nothing. I rise and that’s when a loud rap on the door pierces the silence, quickly followed by two more.

Three heavy, ominous knocks.

My heart instantly jumps up in my throat and nearly suffocates me with its wild pounding. No one comes here. Not normally, and most certainly not when the snow is so thick you can’t come unless you are in a tracked vehicle, and they only do that if there’s a medical emergency. If you’re snowed in, you’re snowed in.

Who is out there? I swallow nervously and take a step toward the door when three new loud knocks make me jump. I shake my head at my own suspiciousness. Whoever it is, it must be someone who needs help. Covering the remaining distance, I then press down on the handle and try to push the door open, but it’s jammed again. I manage a couple of inches, then a hand grips the edge and suddenly the door flies wide open.

I stare at the vision before me. It’s a man: tall, wide, covered in snow from top to toe, and with clothes that are way too thin. Even in the faint light I see how blue his lips are. I open my mouth to ask, I don’t know, maybe what he wants, but then I change my mind. Whoever he is, he is clearly in some kind of emergency. Looking out at the wintry night, then back at the yeti before me, I shake my head in disbelief.

“Good God. Come inside!”

He doesn’t need to be told twice and takes a step forward, past the threshold. Towering over me, his hulking appearance dominates the room. I swallow hard and reach past him to close the door. The wind fights me and snowflakes whip in my face. I hadn’t realized it had started snowing again, and blowing. Behind me Jack is letting out a high-pitched noise.

The door slams closed and I turn back to the man. The top of my head reaches to his shoulder. He is gigantic. He has a big, dirty-blond beard, covered in snow. The snow in his eyelashes has started to melt. I have to crane my neck to meet his eyes. He's frowning, looking down at me with an unreadable expression as he rakes a hand through his hair and shudders.

"Thanks."

His voice is hoarse, a deep baritone that challenges the sudden silence in the house. I still don't move, cornered in the narrow space between him and the door. A girl alone letting in a stranger is not a clever move, but what choice did I have? Let him freeze to death?

"What were you doing out there?" My eyes dart between him and Jack who is lying flat and submissive on the floor, quietly observing me and the frozen stranger. *Fine watch dog you are.*

"I... got lost. My car broke down a few miles down the road and I thought I was heading into Florence, but I must have taken a wrong turn. It started snowing..." His face is impassive with an almost calculating look, his gaze pinning me to the spot with its intensity.

"God, you're soaked! You have like..." I gesture to his chest and legs, "nothing on!"

"Yeah. It was stupid." The beast of a man pulls at the hem of his drenched jacket.

Transfixed by the movement of his large calloused hand as he pinches the material, I then give him a thorough once over, shaking my head inwardly. He's dressed in nothing but a beige cotton jacket and jeans. At least his boots seem reasonable enough. Wracking my brain, I try to think if I have anything that would fit him. I'm pretty sure I don't, actually. I wince, at a loss at what to do.

"Look, come sit in front of the fire at least, let's get you warmed up."

I nod toward the fireplace and he follows my gaze. He pulls

off his boots and sheds the thin jacket. I take it from him. It's soaked and heavy. Underneath he has a white T-shirt that clings to his torso, equally wet. Mr. Wet T-shirt flies through my mind, very inappropriately. I nearly gape. He's huge. He's nothing but muscles. And tattoos. From his wrists up until the fabric of the T-shirt covers it, his arms are covered in intricate patterns. They continue on his thick neck.

"Thank you." His voice is so deep it sends shudders through me. I shake my head as if to rid myself from a spell. He walks toward the couch and I trail behind. That's when we both freeze and look at the TV. There's no sound, but the message is crystal clear and can't be misinterpreted. The man standing three inches from me is on TV, his face taking up the whole screen. The text at the bottom of the screen says: *Escaped serial killer Martin Garrett.*

Everything stills for a moment. My stomach plummets and it feels as if all the bones in my body dissolve. He turns and looks at me, I gasp and take a step back, then I bolt and throw myself inside my little kitchen, slamming the door closed behind me, locking it with violently shaking hands.

Oh God, no! No no no no no! I search frantically for something to defend myself with. I pull out a drawer and find my kitchen knife. I hold it up in front of me, panting hard, lightheaded.

The handle twists once.

"Come on out," he says in a clipped tone. There's a short bark in the background and I reel.

No! Jack! Please don't hurt my dog!

"I'm calling the police!" I scream. I don't have my phone, and what could they do anyway? But he can't know that, can he?

The door shudders as something heavy hits it. I scream, and then the wood by the lock breaks into splinters from the next hit and the door flies open.

"Don't touch me!" I yell and hold the knife up between us.

He eyes it and holds his hands up. "Put down the knife."

“No!” I have tunnel vision. My mind is spinning and it feels like the world is tilting.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Put the knife down.”

I laugh hysterically. “Get away from me!” I hold out the knife straighter, aiming it at him. His gaze hardens and he takes one long stride toward me. One hand goes for my face and as I try to dodge it, his other hand grips my wrist and twists it hard. The bones grind against each other, making me squeal. My fingers lose their grip, I can’t resist his force and the knife clatters to the floor. He kicks it away and grips my other wrist as well. I scream and flail.

“Please! No!”

“Calm down,” he growls. Then he’s got me. He pins me to the wall, his forearm to my throat. “Don’t ever fucking threaten me,” he snarls, his face an inch from mine. His eyes are a dark green, and seem to turn black as they bore into mine.

My pulse beats hard against his skin. All I know is I need to get away or he’ll kill me. I jerk my leg up and knee him in the groin. He turns white and loses his grip. I push at him, but it’s like pushing at a wall. I’ve never laid my hands on anyone that solid before. He grips my arms and pushes me back up against the wall, face first this time.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, girl!”

I jerk and twist but I’m almost completely immobilized with his body pressed against mine. Any second now he’ll strangle me. Or rip me to pieces. Maybe rape me. *Oh God!* I let out a long wail of terror.

Mom, I’m sorry!