Breakneck

Erica Spindler

Published by Sphere

Extract

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BREAKNECK

ERICA SPINDLER

sphere

SPHERE

First published in the United States in 2009 by St Martin's Press
First published in Great Britain in 2009 by Sphere
This paperback edition published in 2009 by Sphere

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-4093-2

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Sphere are natural, renewable and recyclable products sourced from well-managed forests and certified in accordance with the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council.

Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

1

Rockford, Illinois
Sunday, January 11, 2009
3:05 A.M.

The kid's eyes snapped open. *Matt Martin. Twenty-one-year-old computer-hacking loser.* It took only a moment for his expression to shift from sleepy confusion to horrified realization: there was a stranger in his bedroom. That stranger held a gun to his head, to the tender place between his eyes, just above the bridge of his nose.

The one called Breakneck smiled grimly. 'Hello, son.'

The kid went limp with terror. His mouth worked but no sound emerged.

'The gun I'm holding to your head is nothing fancy. An old-fashioned .38 caliber, semiautomatic. Serviceable at best.'

He kept his voice low, tone soothing. 'What's unique about this situation, of course, is the weapon's proximity to its target, your brain. When I pull the trigger, the bullet will rocket from the chamber and explode out of the barrel and into your head. In response, your brains will explode out the back of your skull.'

Breakneck firmed his grip on the weapon. 'The sound will be muffled by the fact that the barrel is pressed to its target, the mess contained by the pillow, bedding and mattress.'

The bony young man began to shake. The smell of urine stung the air. Unmoved by the kid's fear, he went on, 'I'm going to ask you a few questions. Your life depends on your answers.'

The kid's eyes welled with tears.

'I know who you are and what you do. I want what you stole from me.'

'I don't know what you're—'

'Where is it?'

'What? I don't . . . who are y—'

'I'm the guy you shouldn't have fucked with. I want my information. And I want my money.' He increased pressure on the gun; the kid whimpered. 'What do you think, son? Do we do this the easy way? Or the messy way?'

'Easy,' he whispered.

'You jacked some information. And some money. Five hundred grand.'

Recognition flickered in his horrified gaze.

Of course it did. One didn't forget stumbling onto that kind of money.

Especially a small-time little shit like this one.

'I see we're on the same page now. Good.'

'I didn't take your money.'

'Who did?'

'I don't know!' His voice rose. 'No one!'

His eyes darted back and forth. A clear sign he was lying. Breakneck could almost hear him thinking. Mentally scrambling for a way out, weighing his options: *Give him the information? How much – or how little – would keep him alive? Did he dare lie? Struggle? Beg? What were the consequences of each?*

All animals responded to predators in the same way, Breakneck knew. They fought for survival. Using whatever means at their disposal. Over the years, he had seen them all.

Some predators, however, were so smart, so skilled, the fight was as pathetic as it was futile.

'I don't want to hurt you, Matt. But I will. I'm going to

count to three and then I'm going to pull the trigger. One,' he said softly. 'Two . . . thr—'

'Okay, I found it, but I didn't move it!'

'Who did? A name.'

'I don't know . . . an e-mail address and screen name, that's all I have. It's marioman. At Yahoo. Check for yourself . . . on my laptop. I'm Gunner35. My password's 121288. You can get it all with that. I promise . . . go see. It's all there.'

The kid's voice rose as he spoke. Breakneck laid a gloved hand over his mouth to quiet him. 'You did good, Matt. Real good. Thank you.'

He moved quickly, snapping the young man's neck before he had a clue what was happening. With little more than a gurgle, Matt Martin died.

2

Wednesday, January 14
2:00 A.M.

Moonlight bathed the room in icy blue. Detective Mary Catherine Riggio slipped out of bed and into her robe, then crossed to the window. The full moon had transformed the winter night into a sort of twilight zone, a surreal landscape caught between daylight and dark.

'You okay?'

She looked over her shoulder to the bed. The man in it. She smiled, liking the way he looked there. The way he was looking at her.

'I'm fine. I couldn't sleep, that's all. Sorry I woke you.'

'You didn't.'

'Liar.' She turned back to the window. 'It's beautiful.'

'You're beautiful.'

She didn't think of herself that way, she never had. The proverbial tomboy, always scrambling to keep up with her five macho brothers. But he made her feel beautiful. Womanly.

Dan Gallo had come into her life and made her believe in things she never had before.

'Marry me.'

She glanced back at him. 'Very funny.'

'Do I look like I'm joking?'

M.C. searched his serious expression. She voiced the first thought that came into her head. 'You're out of your mind.'

'Why?'

'We hardly know each other.'

'Six months.'

'Not long enough.'

'When it's right, you know it. It feels right to me, M.C.'

He held her gaze. She pressed her lips together, panic licking at her. The past six months had been the happiest of her life. Her cousin Sam had introduced her to the handsome psychologist, then goaded her into accepting the man's invitation to dinner.

She could hear her younger cousin's argument even now: 'What's the problem, M.C.? He's good-looking, single *and* Italian. What more could you want?'

Not a cop. Check. *Not a psychotic criminal.* Check.

Almost too good to be true. So, she had gone on a date. That one had led to others and within weeks, to their spending all their free time together.

Still, the idea of committing terrified her. The thought of losing him terrified her more.

'What about you, Mary Catherine?' Dan asked softly. 'Does it feel right to you?'

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Dear God, it did.* He sat up and the blanket slipped, revealing his naked shoulders and chest. 'I bought a ring.'

'You did not.'

His mouth curved into the crooked little grin she loved. 'I did. But I'm not going to let you see it until you say yes.'

She wanted to. But she was a cop. She'd been badly burned before. Reckless wasn't in her nature.

She opened her mouth to ask for more time; 'Yes' slipped out instead. It felt so good, she said it again, on a laugh. 'Yes, I'll marry you!'

He let out a whoop and jumped out of the bed. She met him halfway; he caught her in his arms and spun her around. They fell onto the bed, alternately laughing and kissing, whispering like kids sharing the best secret ever.

'Want your ring?' he asked. 'It'll make it official.'

'Damn right,' she teased. 'Otherwise I'm still available.'

'Brat.' He kissed her again, then climbed out of bed. Moments later he returned with a small leather box.

With trembling fingers, she opened it. A no-fuss, no-muss, emerald-cut solitaire. He slipped it on her finger; it fit perfectly. It fit *her* perfectly. Tears flooded her eyes.

'If you don't like it, the jeweler said you could exchan—'

'I love it,' she said, lifting her gaze to his.

'Are you certain? I want you to have a ring you lov—'

'I love you,' she whispered, then brought his mouth to hers and drew him with her to the mattress. There, she showed him how utterly happy he had made her.

3

Wednesday, January 14
5:40 A.M.

The call had dragged M.C. out of the warmth of Dan's arms before the sun had even cracked the horizon.

Homicide. Downtown, Rock River Towers.

So much for the cocoon of love, she thought, thirty minutes later as she drew to a stop in front of the apartment complex. Rock River Towers had long been considered one of the city's premier addresses. Fourteen floors. Amenities. River views. Some of its shine had faded as this part of town had lost its luster, but certainly not all.

Bracing herself for the blast of frigid air, M.C. killed the engine and swung out of her SUV. She supposed she should be used to the cold, having lived in northern Illinois her entire life, but on mornings like this she fantasized about moving to Florida.

Hunching deeper into her coat, M.C. glanced around. Four cruisers, her partner Kitt's Taurus, the Identification Bureau guys. She crossed to the first officer. 'Grazzio,' she greeted the rotund, veteran patrolman, 'how's it goin'?'

'I'm cold,' he said. 'And hungry. I'm getting too old for this crap.'

'Tell me about it,' she said. 'What've we got?'

'According to his driver's license, one Matt Martin. Lived in unit 510. Corroborated by the name on number 510's mailbox.'

'Anything else?'

'Part-time student at Rock Valley. Studying computer science. Got that from a neighbor.'

The junior college, affectionately called 'Rock Bottom' by the locals. 'Who found him?'

'A neighbor called. Because of the smell.'

'You have contact info?'

'Got it. Vic's been dead awhile.'

M.C. didn't bother asking him how long, that'd be up to the forensic pathologist and ID guys to establish.

The elevator took her to the fifth floor. She stepped off and the smell hit her hard. M.C. dug a small jar of menthol-ated ointment from her pocket, applied a smear under her nose, then started down the hall.

The smell would have been subtle until the apartment door was opened. It reminded her of the time the family deep freeze in the basement had gone kaput. Nobody'd had a clue until her brother Max opened it. The house stank for months after.

Martin would have some damn unhappy neighbors for a while.

M.C. reached 510 and greeted the officer standing duty. He handed her the scene log. She signed in, then handed it back. 'Coroner's office been contacted?'

He grunted an affirmation and she stepped into the stifling hot apartment – and immediately began to itch in her wool sweater.

Her partner, Detective Kitt Lundgren, poked her head out the bedroom doorway. Early fifties, a veteran of the Violent Crimes Bureau, Kitt had endured some of the worst life had to offer – and come out stronger. When they'd been paired to work the notorious Sleeping Angel Killer case, M.C. had considered Kitt a burned-out head case and fought the partnership.

Now, M.C. couldn't imagine the job without her.

'Body's in here,' Kitt said.

M.C. nodded and headed that way, picking her way around debris. 'What's the thermostat set on? Eighty?'

'Could help establish TOD. Maybe he was killed before the outside temp rose. What was it this past weekend?'

'Single digits. Could be the perp wanted to speed up the decomposition process?'

'Last to the party again,' ID Bureau Detective Rich Miller called as she entered the room.

The Identification Bureau served as the department's crime scene techs. They did it all: collected and processed evidence, dusted for prints, photographed the scene, even gathered insect life from corpses.

Bobby Jackson, the newest member of the ID team, snapped her picture and grinned. 'Poor Mary Catherine, dragged out of her nice, warm bed.'

He didn't know the half of it. She smiled at the thought, wondering how long it would take Kitt to notice the ring. A part of her wanted to shout out her happiness, but the other wanted to hold it close for just awhile longer.

'If you two don't mind,' M.C. said, 'Mr Martin here is needing some attention.' Without waiting for a response, she turned her attention to the victim. He rested on his back in the bed, covers up to his chest, head at an unnatural angle. The arm under the bedding lay over his chest, the other on top of the covers, at his side. It didn't look as if he had struggled against his attacker, though looks could be deceiving.

He'd been tall and skinny with a shock of bleached blond hair. Here, as in the living room, junk food and fast-food wrappers were scattered about. A half-dozen empty energy drink cans littered both nightstands. His favorite appeared to have been Red Bull.

She gazed at them. Energy drinks had become popular with young people. Too popular. The media had been buzzing with stories of their use – and abuse.

Had he used the caffeine-loaded drinks to stay awake? M.C. wondered. To study? Or do something else?

'No blood,' Kitt said.

M.C. inspected the hand on top of the blanket. 'Nails appear clean.'

'Check this out,' Kitt said, indicating an angry-looking bruise on his forehead, between his eyes.

Perfectly round. Like the ring on a bull's-eye.

M.C. drew her eyebrows together. 'What the hell made that?'

'Our victim found himself in a tenuous position, Detectives.'

They turned. The statement had come from Francis Xavier Roselli, the coroner's lead pathologist. Small, precise and a devout Catholic, the first thing Francis did at every scene was cross himself, whisper a prayer for the departed's immortal soul and ask for the guidance of St Luke.

'Excuse me?' Kitt said.

'Our vic had the business end of a gun pressed to his head.' The pathologist worked his fingers into snug-fitting latex gloves. 'Pressed quite firmly, judging by the color of the bruise.'

It's why he hadn't struggled.

'The outline's crisp. Your perp never wavered. His hands were not shaking.'

M.C. indicated the circular, yellow stain on the light-colored covers. 'Scared the piss out of the poor kid.'

'Then he killed him,' Kitt murmured. 'That's cold.'

'But he didn't shoot him,' M.C. added. 'Interesting.'

Francis joined them. 'It looks to me like the perpetrator broke his neck. I'll know the full story after autopsy.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow, midday.'

The pathologist didn't expect a comment, nor did he wait for one. While he examined the victim, M.C. and Kitt took in the rest of the apartment.

Not the typical college kid's bachelor pad. M.C. moved her gaze over the apartment's spacious interior. Nice place, though the kid had pitted it out. Drink cans and food wrappers littered every table. Dirty clothes strewn on the floor, furniture. She stepped over an open bag of corn chips. If Matt Martin had owned a vacuum, he'd never used it.

Stylistically, the furniture was a mixed bag. But it was all of good quality. Leather couch and armchair. Tall, ornate armoire. Marble-top dining table.

'Imagine what the bathroom's going to look like,' Kitt said.

'I'd rather not, thanks.' She picked up a cup containing a nasty-looking black liquid. She sniffed it and made a face. 'What the hell?'

Kitt peeked over her shoulder. 'Chewing tobacco.'

She set the cup back down. 'What do you think the rent on this place is?'

'Dunno. Seven bills, maybe more.'

'Probably more.'

'He lived well for a twenty-one-year-old, part-time student.'

'No joke.' M.C. checked the front closet. She thumbed through the several coats that hung there, including a leather bomber jacket and a topcoat. A *cashmere* topcoat, judging by the feel of it.

They made their way into the kitchen. The refrigerator and freezer were well stocked. A wine rack sported a couple of bottles of red wine. Nice bottles. Ones that went for twenty bucks apiece.

Better than she could afford.

M.C. glanced over her shoulder at Kitt, who was leafing through a stack of mail on the counter. 'This kid have a job other than being a student?'

'Could be his parents have money.'

'Could be. Or he has a job that pays well.'

'Like dealing.'

'That'd be my guess.'

'Which would explain how he ended up dead.'

'Exactly.'

M.C. brought her left hand to her head. 'So, we begin with his fam—'

'What the hell is that?'

'What?'

'That.' Kitt grabbed her hand. 'It's a ring!'

M.C. laughed and held her hand out.

'My God, when did that happen?'

'Last night. I thought maybe he'd talked to you?'

'Not a word.' Kitt lifted her gaze from the ring. 'And you said yes?'

'Obviously.' M.C. frowned. 'You sound surprised.'

'You two hardly know each other.'

'Six months.' It was weird hearing her own protest being offered to her and defending it with Dan's. 'Long enough to know he makes me happy.'

Kitt opened her mouth as if to say more, then shut it and shook her head. 'Congratulations.'

'You were going to say something else, what was it?'

'I just want to make sure you're doing this for the right reasons. And not because of Lance and how that—'

'I'm not.'

'Or because you're turning thirty and you think you have to be—'

'Married? Because that's what my mother's drummed into my head?' She sent Kitt an exasperated look. 'I've never done what my mother thought I should before. Why would I start now?'

Kitt laughed. 'She's going to be ecstatic.'

'We'll see. After all, Dan's only *half* Italian.'

'Detectives?' They turned toward Francis, standing in the bedroom doorway. 'I'm finished here,' he said, removing his gloves.

'Any surprises?' Kitt asked.

'None. No outward evidence of drug use, though toxicology will give us the full picture.'

'What're you thinking about time of death?'

'It's hot in here, which would have accelerated the process . . . Best guess is late Saturday night, early Sunday morning.'

M.C. had come to learn that Francis's 'best guess' was always damn close. Ever humble, Francis Xavier Roselli described himself as 'competent.' As far as M.C. was concerned, the man was brilliant.

'I see congratulations are in order, Detective.'

Brilliant and observant, obviously. 'Yes, thank you.'

'Who's the lucky guy?'

She told him, feeling herself flush. Moments later, as they left the apartment, Kitt leaned toward her. 'I never thought I'd see hard-as-nails M.C. Riggio beaming like a teenager in love.'

M.C. swallowed a laugh and scowled at her partner. 'Put a sock in it, Lundgren.'

4

Wednesday, January 14
10:30 A.M.

Notifying a victim's next of kin was a wrenching, thankless task. M.C. wished she could pass the job off to somebody else. She couldn't. The great majority of murders were committed by those closest to the victims. Being the one who delivered the bad news also meant being the first to see the reaction to that news.

She and Kitt climbed out of Kitt's Taurus. Judging by this West Side house, the family was solidly middle class. A silver minivan was parked in the drive, under a well-worn basketball hoop.

'You or me?' Kitt asked as they approached the front door.

A Christmas wreath still hung there, a sad-looking Santa surrounded by worn silver bells. 'You.'

Kitt nodded and they crossed the porch. Mothers responded better to Kitt. She supposed that was because Kitt had been a mother – and had lost a child.

They rang the bell. A dog began to bark. A minute later a woman in a pink velour jogging suit came to the door.

She peered suspiciously out the sidelight at them.

M.C. held up her badge. Beside her, Kitt did the same. 'Police,' she said.

The woman stared hard at their IDs, then unlocked the dead bolt. Cracking open the door, she gazed out at them.

'Mrs Martin?' Kitt asked.

'Yes?'

'Detectives Riggio and Lundgren, RPD.'

'Justin really is sick, Officers. I know he's missed a lot of school and believe me, I'm not happy about it, either.'

She thought they were truancy officers. 'We're Rockford Police, Mrs Martin. We're not here about Justin.'

'Then why . . . who . . .'

There was no kind way to deliver such news. The best way, M.C. had learned over the years, was to simply say it – as gently but firmly as possible.

'Do you have a son named Matt?' Kitt asked.

'Matthew, yes.' Fear raced into her eyes. 'What's happened?'

'I'm afraid we have some bad news. Your son's dead, Mrs Martin. I'm so sorry.'

The woman simply stared at her, as if unable to fully grasp what Kitt was saying. 'Dead? I don't understand.'

'He was murdered.'

'I just talked to him. He was fine.'

'When was that, Mrs Martin?'

'Yester— no, Saturday. You have the wrong Martin.'

'I'm so sorry,' Kitt said gently.

'Mom? Is everything okay?'

Another son. The previously mentioned, absent from school Justin, she would bet. Judging by his size, he was close in age to Matt.

He crossed to the door and laid his arm across his mother's shoulders. The picture of the man of the house, even with a bright red nose and fever-glazed eyes.

'They say your brother's . . . that Matt's—' The woman choked back the rest.

Kitt helped her out. 'Your brother's dead. I'm so sorry.'

Again, the dumbfounded, disbelieving gaze. The gradual realization, denial, then horror.

The young man blinked. 'I don't . . . no, that can't be.'

'Are you certain?' the woman asked, tone pleading. 'Maybe you made a mistake?'

'Perhaps we should sit down?'

The woman nodded and led them to a small, neat living room. Without speaking, they all sat.

'It happened at his apartment. Although how he died hasn't been substantiated yet, it was obviously a homicide. I hate to have to do this now, but it's imperative we move the investigation forward as quickly as possible. I need to ask you a few questions. Are you able to answer?'

Justin spoke first. 'I am.'

'How old are you, Justin?'

'Eighteen.'

'And Matt was twenty-one?'

'Yes.'

'Were you close?'

He nodded, throat working. 'I was going to live with him when I . . . when I graduated this spring.'

'He had a nice place,' Kitt said softly. 'How long had he lived there?'

'Six months, I guess.' He looked at his mother in question; she concurred.

'He was in school?'

The young man nodded. 'Rock Valley. He was a computer major.'

'He have a girlfriend?'

'No. He was a total geek.'

'How about friends? He have many?'

'Yeah, he had friends. They were mostly like him. Liked computers. Computer games, the Internet.'

'We'd like to talk to them. They might be able to help.'

Justin stood. 'I'll write down their names. The ones I know, anyway.'

He left the room and Kitt turned her attention back to the woman. 'Did Matt have a job?'

'He repaired computers. Freelance. Out of his apartment.'

She reached for a tissue and immediately began to shred it. 'I was so proud of him. He never asked me for a penny.'

M.C. noted the fact. Interesting, considering his lifestyle. The computer repair business would have had to have been extremely lucrative.

Or Matt Martin had had another source of income.

'Was your son ever in any trouble?' Kitt went on.

'Never. He was a good boy. Quiet.'

'No problems with drugs?'

'No. Absolutely not.'

Justin returned and handed M.C. a piece of loose-leaf paper. He had written a half-dozen names on it. Besides two of them he'd included a phone number. 'Matt was clean. Totally. Didn't smoke, either.'

'We noticed a lot of empty energy drink cans in the apartment.'

'He used them to stay awake. To study. Play on the Internet.'

'He didn't like to sleep,' the woman added. 'Even as a child.'

'Can you think of any reason someone would want him dead?'

Justin suddenly looked stricken. His eyes filled with tears; his throat worked. He shook his head.

'Mrs Martin?'

'No,' she whispered. 'I can't believe this is happening.'

Moments later, M.C. and Kitt were on the street, standing beside Kitt's sedan.

M.C. frowned. 'I didn't see a computer at Martin's apartment. Did you?'

'Odd, a computer geek with no computer.'

While Kitt dialed Jackson and Miller, M.C. trotted back up to the Martins' front door. Justin opened it before she knocked. 'I have one more question,' she said. 'What kind of computer did your brother have?'

'A Dell laptop.'

'He ever lend it out or—'

'No way. He wouldn't even let me use it.'

M.C. returned to Kitt, who was ending her call. 'Jackson and Miller?' she asked.

'Still at the scene. No computer in the apartment or his vehicle.'