

MARTY

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AND SO IT BEGINS

Martina Martin huddled in her corner of the nest, all too aware that in a short time the sun would rise on this fateful day—the day her parents would joyfully and proudly attempt to kill her.

She had always liked the fact that her nest was perched so high in one of the tallest trees within her part of the forest. She felt as though the sun rose each day just for her first, though today, she deeply dreaded the sun's arrival. But there it was, lighting up the sky to the east. The first glimmer of warm light, beginning to overtake the night and bring daytime to her world. At first it was just a glow, then a speck, and then a moment later, the first beam broke over the horizon. The light began to eagerly fill the sky, quickly making its way toward her tree. First it crossed the mountaintops, and then it washed down into the tree-filled valleys, awaking the forest from its slumber to welcome this horrible and vile day. Then finally, the brightness of the sun which Martina had always considered a good and welcome friend invaded her tree and her nest, as foreboding as any enemy could be. It stretched across her branch and consumed her purple-feathered body in a deceptively friendly glow.

She looked around to see the beauty of her home, her forest, her world. She saw the proud green trees gently swaying in the breeze, the majestic hills and mountaintops, the distant valleys and fertile meadows, the colorful and all-too-happy flowers, and the grass-covered ground alive with all sorts of creatures, from ants to butterflies and animals of all kinds. She heard the buzzing of bees and the morning songs of other birds, but what she heard the most was the beating of her heart as she realized her parents were approaching. She squeezed her eyes shut and pretended to be fast asleep, knowing that such a ruse would only buy her a few moments—a few precious moments of life before her fate would be sealed and the ground, which she had always observed from afar, would be up close and personal.

“Martina-a-a,” her mother said, almost singing it. “Time to wake up, dear.”

Martina squeezed her eyes even tighter.

“Rise and shine,” her dad chimed in. “Today’s the day you learn to fly.”

Martina thrust her eyes open in stern defiance and jerked her head toward them. “No! I don’t want to fly! I can’t fly! Don’t you care if I die?”

Martina’s dad, a wise and happy though slightly plump purple martin, knelt beside her and put his wing around her. “You won’t die, Martina. You’ll soar high and have more fun than you could ever imagine. Get up and come over here. I want to show you something.” As he arose, he gently nudged Martina up with him and toward the edge of the nest. “Do

you see this vast and wonderful forest we live in? We can see quite a lot from this very nest. But nothing like what you can see when you're soaring above it all."

"That sky you see," Martina's mother added as she walked toward them, "that's your domain. It belongs to you. That's where you rule. It's your playground, and it's your life." Martina looked out across the sky. It was such a beautiful blue, and it seemed to stretch on forever. Its random soft clouds looked like puffs of laughter, and in the distant valley below she saw a colorful smiling rainbow that had just formed after a cleansing shower of rain.

"Besides," her father insisted, "it's time for you to live your own way. It's time to build your own nest and perhaps begin your very own family. Maybe in that limb just over there." He pointed to the other side of the tree. "You'll still be here, in the family tree. Close to home and near your loved ones, but you'll have a new freedom and new experiences that you haven't even dreamed of."

Martina's mother, who had nestled in behind them, softly added, "Martina, you have to trust us. It's time."

"I can't do it, I said!" Martina blurted out with the utmost anxiety. "What if I really can't fly and I fall to the ground?"

With a playful grin on his face, her father said, "Then you'll be the dead bird at the bottom of the tree. But don't worry, a cat or some other animal will come along and clean up the mess."

"Harold!" her mother chided. "Don't make her more scared than she already is. Martina, your father is just carrying on. But he is right, though—so don't fail. Remember what we've told you and you will fly, I promise."

A now very frightened Martina pleaded again, "I'm too afraid. I know everything you both said about wingspan and body arch and pitch and roll and all that stuff. I also remember how you said that everyone's afraid at first." Then she puffed herself up to look big and lowered her voice to imitate her dad, "Courage is doing what you must despite the fear. You have to take a leap of faith. It's only scary until you've done it. No purple martin has ever not flown." Slumping back down, she finished, "But I'm still scared. I don't want to fly. Can't I just be a songbird instead and sing from here?"

That's when her father said one simple word: her mother's name. And with that, Martina felt her mother's soft embrace turn into a hefty push. Martina was now falling, and fast.



Not too far off in the distance, under a different tree, someone else had awoken with the morning light. As the sunrise joyfully poured through the trees, Roger Ruzo was just waking up from a long night's sleep. He had dreamed of chasing rabbits and squirrels, as many forest cats do, and had awoken a bit tired from all the excitement. As he raised his head from his curled-up body, he felt the sun wash over his gray-haired face. He twitched his long white whiskers and said to himself, "Looks like another nice day." After a huge

yawn, he laid his chin down on his paw, but felt the emptiness in his stomach and decided it was time to get up and start the morning.

Rising to his feet, he first stretched his back up in an arch, and then straightened his dark and light gray body out longways, making the faint black tiger stripes look almost like an accordion being played. He had chosen this particular tree to sleep under because it had a large swirl of roots above ground that helped conceal him. But also, and perhaps mostly, he had chosen it because it stood next to a Scrumptious Tree that was replete with fruit that was ripe and ready to eat. As he sat down and surveyed the fruit, he realized that he, too, was being surveyed. Someone, or something, was stalking him from behind.

He heard the tall grass rustle behind him, then the snapping of a twig. He sat perfectly still, except to twist his ears toward the sound and raise his head slightly to sniff the air. Realizing who it was, he continued to look at the fruit and began to twitch the tip of his tail. A moment later, he heard the telltale sounds of a terrible beast lunging his way. With a huge leap it sailed through the air and landed on Ruzo's tail, latching on with all its strength.

But Ruzo swung himself around, easily pulling his tail from his foe's grasp, and rolled the small brown rabbit over onto his back. Placing one paw on his chest to hold him in place, Roger Ruzo raised his other paw high into the air. With a quick and deliberate swipe, he began to tickle his squirming and laughing nemesis.

"Stop! Stop, Ruzo! You win!" the rabbit giggled in excitement with his back leg thumping the air.

"You started it, Buddy!" Ruzo replied. After another moment of tickling, he finally released his small, fluffy captive. "So where's the rest of your bunch?"

"Oh, they're just over the hilltop. Mom and Dad found some fresh clovers, so we were all having breakfast. But I heard you over here," Buddy Rabbit explained, still giggling a little.

Hearing a squirrel in a nearby tree scolding her children made Ruzo wonder if Buddy's parents knew he'd come over to visit. He asked, "Do they know you're over here?"

"No, but I wanted to say good morning," Buddy confessed.

"Well, good morning to you too!" Ruzo said as he rubbed the top of the rabbit's head. "Okay, you little rascal, it's good to see you, but you better get back before your family worries about where you went."

"You're probably right," the happy rabbit agreed. "See ya later, Ruzo!" he yelled out as he hopped away heading back to his family.

"See ya later, rabbinator!" Ruzo yelled back. "Enjoy your breakfast!"

Then he turned his attention again toward the Scrumptious Fruit that hung high from the branches before him. It didn't take long for him to locate a nice plump one. Now, how to get it? Feeling a little lazy this morning, he didn't want to climb if he didn't have to, so he thought, *Maybe if I*

throw a rock and hit the stem right, the fruit will fall, and I'll catch it. So throw rocks he did, though not very accurately. Regardless, he was having fun all the same. "He winds up. He pitches. It's another wild one, folks," he called out as he threw one rock after another. He was quite good at hitting limbs and leaves, and even better at hitting nothing at all. Still, he persevered, knowing that eventually he would hit that stem and gain his sweet, juicy prize.



Meanwhile, Martina was still falling. Her back was to the ground as she watched her nest move farther and farther away. The tree limbs were zipping past, and it looked to her as though the tree was shooting upward—and gaining speed.

She heard her parents yell out, "Turn over! Spread your wings!"

She yelled back at them, "That was really RUDE!" Then she mumbled to herself, "I can't *believe* they pushed me out like that!"

It took a couple of seconds for what they had said to sink in, but finally, it did. So she twisted with all her might and managed to spin her body, a little too much. She flipped over and saw the ground fast approaching. It suddenly looked much larger than she remembered, but only for a second. She continued to spin and ended up back where she started, staring straight up at the sky.