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SILVER

Written by **Chris Hammer**

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CHRIS HAMMER

SILVER

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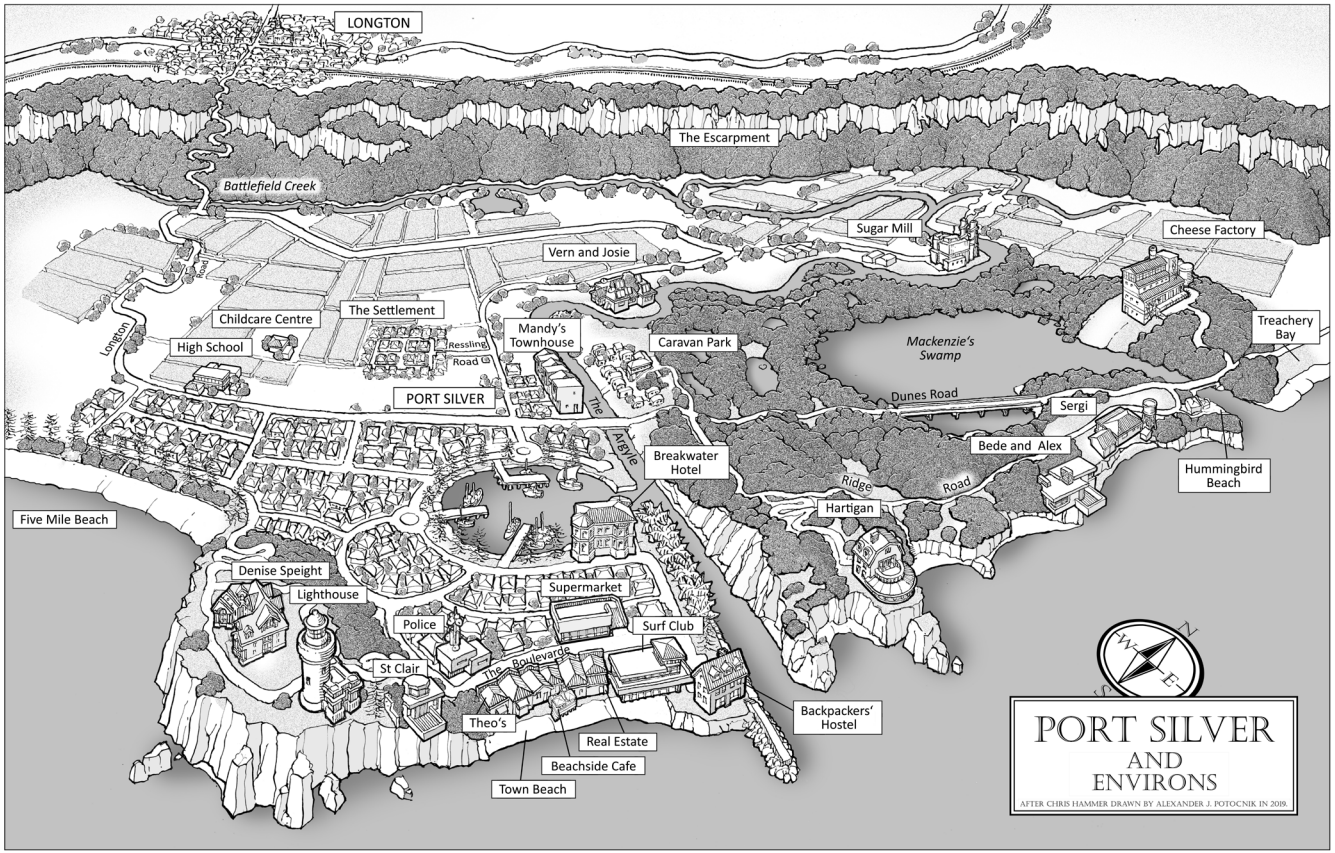

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MONDAY

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chapter one

THE SUN SLIDES AND GLANCES, FLARING IN HIS EYES. HE CAN'T SEE THE BALL and swings blind, hoping: hoping to connect, hoping he doesn't get out, hoping he doesn't get struck. Hoping he escapes embarrassment, just this once. So he swings, eyes closed, useless to him, as if in prayer. And somehow, by some divine whim, the bat does strike the ball. Through the wooden handle, through its perished rubber grip and unravelling string, he feels the power of the stroke, the ball collected by the very heart of the bat. He feels the spongy tennis ball flattening, compressing, then expanding, sent on its accelerating arc, launched away, as if dictated by heaven. And he feels in that moment of impact, in that instant, perfection. He opens his eyes, releasing the handle and shielding his eyes in time to see the ball, wonder at it, as it goes soaring over the wooden palings, over into the neighbour's yard. A six. Six and out. Dismissed, but in glory, not in shame. No dull thud of ball into garbage bin,

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no raucous leg before appeal, no taunting laughter greeting a skied catch. A six. Over the fence. A hero's death.

'Fuck me, Martin. What a shot,' says Uncle Vern.

'Language, Vern,' says his mother.

'You hit it, you get it,' says the bowler, the boy from down the street.

But Martin says nothing, does nothing, doesn't move, caught in the moment. The moment he connected. That perfect moment, caught in time.

And then.

The phone rings. 'Mumma, mumma,' calls Enid, or Amber, one or other of the twins, the inseparable, indistinguishable twins. And his mother goes, before she can compliment him on his shot, gift him the praise he deserves. To the phone, to the call that bisects the world, that draws the clearest of lines between before and after.

Thirty-three years later Martin Scarsden drives, driving into memory, driving down towards Port Silver. Part of him is concentrating, intent on the road, navigating the hairpins as he guides the car down the escarpment; part of him is lost in the past, lost in that perfect day, the day when fate flared so brightly and so briefly, the same day it dropped a curtain upon them, like the end of a play. This day the sun is filtered, flickering through the rainforest canopy, strobing. Squinting, he cannot see the ocean, but senses it, knows that should he pull over, if there were space on this narrowest of roads to stop the car, he would be able to see it: the Pacific. It's there, beyond the trees, the great blue expanse. 'Can you see the sea?' his father asks him through the years, just as he asked it each and every time they descended through these hairpin corners. 'See the sea, get home free,' he'd say with a laugh.

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Martin never could see it, though; never. But a time had come when he hadn't needed to, he had come to know it was there, beyond the bottom of the escarpment, beyond the dairy farms, the cane fields and the river flats, past the fishing harbour and the holiday shacks and the long white sands. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it.

And so it is on this early autumn day, as he winds the car down through the spotted gums and the cabbage tree ferns, the palm trees and the staghorns and the cedars trailing vines, bell-birds chiming. He can feel it in the air, moist and cool becoming moist and warm as he descends, ears popping, towards the ocean, the tugging dryness of a drought-ravaged inland left the far side of the coastal range. And in the distance, still unseen but already imposing itself: Port Silver. The land of his youth, revisited.

'Vern! Vern!' she cries, voice infused with some unknown emotion. 'Martin! Girls!' He's climbing back over the fence, grey wood splintered and dry to the touch, ball in hand, his glorious dog-chewed trophy, when his mother bursts out through the screen door, laughing and crying at the same time, emotions sweeping her along like an incoming tide. 'We done it. Jesus Christ. We won the bastard!'

Martin looks to his uncle, but sees Vern's own incomprehension at his sister's unprecedented swearing.

'Hilary?' prompts Vern.

'The lottery, Vern. The fucking lottery! Division one!'

Martin leaps from the fence into a yard unfamiliar, ball forgotten, bat abandoned. The lottery. They've won the lottery. *The fucking lottery*. Vern hugs one or other of Martin's sisters, she hugs him back, happy and uncomprehending, then they are

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dancing, all five of them: his mother, the twins, himself and Uncle Vern, dancing on the Victor-mowed wicket as the boy from down the road returns scampering back down the road, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, carrying the news before him like a southerly: the Scarsdens have won division one. *The fucking lottery*.

The escarpment joins the plain, the rainforest ends and the dairy farms begin; PORT SILVER 30 KILOMETRES states the sign. Martin Scarsden returns wholly to the present. Port Silver, its ghosts sheltering from the iridescent sun, but awaiting him nevertheless. Port Silver. For pity's sake, why had Mandy chosen this town of all towns, his home town, to restart their lives? He crosses the old bridge over Battlefield Creek, the stream flowing along the base of the range, the boundary between the natural world of the escarpment and the imposed geometry of the dairy farms and cane fields. He's about to shift into a higher gear in preparation for the faster roads of the flatlands when he sees her: the hitchhiker.

Her legs flash in the subtropical sun beneath denim cut-offs. There's a tank top, a bare midriff, her thumb casually extended. A foreigner then, if she's using her thumb. Her hair is out, and so is her smile, broadening as he pulls onto the shoulder: a gravel clearing at the juncture between the hills and the plain, near the turn-off to the sugar mill. Even before he stops, he sees her companion, his hair dark and long, sitting with their packs, back from the road, out of the sun, out of sight of approaching motorists. Martin smiles; he understands the deception, takes no offence.

'Port Silver?' asks the young woman.

'Sure.' It's not as if the road goes anywhere else.

Martin uses his key to open the boot, the internal release of his old Toyota Corolla long broken. The man hefts the backpacks

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effortlessly, drops them into the cavity, closes the lid. Martin can see his arms, tattoos on sculpted flesh, the musculature of youth, wrapped in the smell of tobacco and insouciance. The young woman climbs in beside Martin; the man gets into the back seat, shoving Martin's meagre possessions to one side. She smells nice, some sort of herbal perfume. Her companion removes his sunglasses and offers a grateful smile. 'Thanks, man. Good of you.' He reaches over the seat, gives Martin a powerful handshake. 'Royce. Royce McAlister.'

'Topaz,' says the girl, replacing her companion's hand with her own. 'And you are?' She leaves her hand in his for a flirtatious moment.

'Martin,' he replies, grinning.

He starts the car, guides it back onto the road, childhood memories banished.

'You live in Port Silver?' asks Topaz.

'No. Not for a long time.'

'We're after work.' Her accent is American. 'Heard there's plenty up here this time of year.'

'Maybe,' says Martin. 'Holiday peak is over, kids back at school, but you might get lucky.'

'What about fruit picking?' It's Royce, leaning forward, his accent unmistakably Australian, broad and unpretentious. 'Greenhouses?'

'For sure,' says Martin. 'But it's harder work than waiting at a cafe or catering for tourists.'

'I need it for my visa,' says Topaz. 'I work for three months outside the cities, I get another year in Oz. We took the overnight train up to Longton. Word in Sydney is there's plenty of work up this way.'

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'Possibly. I wouldn't know,' says Martin. Back when he was a child the greenhouses up the river were full of migrants, itinerant labourers gaining their first foothold in their new country. Nowadays foreign backpackers are supposedly the workforce of choice.

Topaz talks on, her enthusiasm infectious, recounting some of their adventures: how she met Royce in Goa, how he followed her to Bali, then Lombok, how they fell for each other and came to Australia together. Royce is chiming in, interjecting with observant quips and laughter. It's like a performance, a two-hander, with Martin the audience; he's grateful for the distraction. Royce has put his sunglasses back on. They sit askew, one arm missing, but he shows no sign of being bothered by the deformity, as if all sunglasses should be made this way. 'We just go with the flow, man,' he says, summarising the moral of their story. It's all Martin can do to keep his eyes on the road as he steals glances at the pair of them, Royce in the back seat with his square jaw, open smile and defiant sunnies, Topaz next to him in the front, seatbelt carving a valley between her breasts. She seems aware of his attention, appears to welcome it. And soon Martin is talking as well, the car propelled towards Port Silver on a road canefield straight, advising them on the best beaches and surf breaks, fishing spots and swimming holes. Then Port Silver is upon them: a new high school, a car lot, a budget motel, a clump of fast-food franchises. Squat palm trees line the road. Changed yet familiar after twenty-three years. The hitchhikers say he can drop them anywhere, but he insists on taking them to a place they've heard of near Town Beach, a backpacker hostel. Sure enough, there it is, a two-storey weatherboard, painted an eye-catching blue. SPERM COVE BACKPACKERS says the sign, adorned with a smiling whale, one eye

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winking, one flipper forming a thumbs-up. He parks next to it, overlooking the beach, and helps Royce retrieve their packs. He's almost sorry to leave them.

Alone in the car once again, he doesn't start the engine straight away. He can feel the warm breeze on his face, the touch of it unchanged in two decades, warm and moist and gentle, so different from the parched gusts of the interior, or the gritty second-hand air of Sydney. Below him, on the beach, more backpackers loll in the sun, chatting in groups or playing soccer. He feels a pang of envy: he'd never gone with the flow, lived for the day, romanced a pretty girl in the islands of Indonesia. There had been no gap year, no floating through Asia, no great Australian road trip. Adolescence was something to be endured; why extend it? It was straight to uni and, before he had even finished his degree, straight into the newspaper. His travelling had been different: sweating over laptops in war zones instead of smoking reefers in Bali; interviewing self-important men in suits instead of serving eccentric locals in an English pub; sleeping with affection-starved strangers instead of falling in love. Maybe now it will be different, living here with Mandalay and her son Liam; now he has this chance to start life over. Not going with the flow, but his big chance, an opportunity to catch up with life and embrace it before it heads over the horizon and leaves him stranded for good. He decides the hitchhikers have done him a favour. He turns from the beach, starts the engine. Port Silver isn't about the past, he tells himself, it's about the future. About making a future, shaping it. And the future looks bright and welcoming. Mandy is here, waiting for him, the single mum he met and fell for out on the edge of nowhere. Surely that has its own romance, as good as Goa or Lombok.

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He feels a surge of optimism and longing; for a fleeting moment, as he puts the car into gear, the world seems to be spinning back towards equilibrium. He can't wait to see her, to begin this new life.

There is blood everywhere. He pushes the door open and there is blood everywhere. The door is ajar, keys in the lock, so he pushes it open, a greeting forming on his lips, and there is blood everywhere. He has located the townhouse, parked the car, found the door. The door is ajar. Now there is blood. Everywhere. Splattered on the hallway wall, a scarlet handprint like a child's stencil, red drips on the cream-tiled floor as if left by a careless painter. He can smell it, its metallic odour engulfing him, penetrating his pores. And amid the blood, a body. Lifeless legs protrude from an archway off the passage, legs dressed in beige chinos, brown shoes with translucent rubber soles, the colour of dull amber. Men's shoes. The body, torso unseen, is lying face down. And blood is still flowing out, advancing, pooling on the tiles. Everywhere. The sight stops Martin in his stride, mouth still open, her name on his lips, unuttered, horror invading his mind, flooding in through his eyes. He feels confusion, then panic.

'Mandy!' he yells. 'Mandy?!'

He stops. Listens. Nothing. The pool of blood, glistening, still silently expanding. Is the person alive?

'Mandy!' he calls again, voice edged with fear. Is she in here? Is she close? Is she hurt?

He inches forward. Now he can see the full body, legs stretching from the passage, the torso in the living room, a scarlet circle between the man's shoulder blades, like a target painted on his

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linen shirt with a gaping bullseye, flesh parted and blood-filled. On the floor, the pooling flow is so very red against the cream tiles. Martin needs to get past it, past the body and its glistening moat. He backs up, runs, leaps the enamel pool where it has spread across the passage and reached the wall, landing beyond it at the bottom of some stairs. The man is unmoving. Martin can't see the face, but the body is thickset with dark hair, first signs of grey at the temples, well groomed, the patch of blood sticking his white linen shirt to the wound in his back.

A killer. There's a killer. Is the attacker still here? 'Mandy!' his voice flares again.

His mind starts working, thoughts emerging from beneath the panic, the adrenaline and the shock. He squats at the edge of the blood, convincing himself to become perfectly still. He watches, listens, but he can detect no sign of life. He reaches out, supporting himself with one hand on the doorjamb, below another red handprint, using the other hand to feel for a pulse in the man's neck, detecting nothing. The flesh is warm, giving; the man has only just died. There is blood on Martin's hand.

There is something in the man's left hand, held firm in his dead fingers. A postcard; it looks like a postcard, blood pooling around its edges. Martin leans close, stretched above the body, still supporting himself with one arm on the doorjamb. The card is obscured by the dead man's hand and his creeping blood, but it looks religious, a depiction of Christ or a saint, with a golden halo.

A sound. And it's now that he sees her, through the archway, sitting motionless on a couch in the living room, hands bloodied, staring at the dead man. It's as if she can't see Martin kneeling there, just the body next to him. Her hair is different, reddish

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brown instead of blonde, but that's not what draws his eyes. *Hands bloodied*. A trail, drops of blood spattered on the tiles, link her to the body.

'Mandy?' There is blood on her clothes as well. His voice is urgent, but there's no response. 'Mandalay!'

She looks at him, dazed. She shakes her head ever so slightly, perhaps a gesture of disbelief, perhaps a sign that he shouldn't be here.

Martin thinks of her ten-month-old son, his heart pounding out his concern. 'Mandy, where's Liam? Where is he?'

But she can only shake her head. He's not sure what the gesture signifies.

Martin pulls out his phone, half expecting there to be no signal, not in this alternative reality. But the signal is strong. Five bars. He dials triple zero, asks for the ambulance. And then for police.

He's lost Mandy's attention; she's staring at the body once more. The dead man is sprawled through the archway, but the blood has not yet extended all the way across the entrance to the lounge room. And yet Martin doesn't move, he doesn't go to her. Instead he returns to his phone, finds the number of a Melbourne law firm, Wright, Douglas and Fenning. Mandy's solicitor: Winifred Barbicombe. She's going to need Winifred more than she needs him.

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chapter two

THERE IS SOMETHING REPTILIAN ABOUT THE POLICE SERGEANT, SOMETHING predatory. His eyes are hooded, his lips thin, his skin scarred by acne. There is a greyness to his complexion that doesn't belong in a beach town. He stares at Martin for a full minute, until Martin can no longer hold his gaze and looks away towards the constable standing by the video camera next to the interview room door. She looks as uncomfortable as Martin feels, shifting her weight from one leg to the other, staring resolutely at the camera's screen, as the silence endures. Only once eye contact is broken does the policeman deign to speak, his voice flat. 'Interview conducted by Sergeant Johnson Pear with Martin Michael Scarsden. Port Silver police station. Two-ten pm, the fourth of March.' Martin waits, but the policeman pauses again, his eyes unreadable. The tally light on the video camera flicks on and off every five seconds or so.

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'All right, Mr Scarsden. In your own words. Please recount how you came to be at the residence of Mandalay Blonde today.'

Martin clears his throat, feeling uncomfortable, as if he stands accused of something, even as he reminds himself he is blameless. 'Last night I stayed in Glen Innes. I drove there yesterday from Sydney, up the New England Highway. I stayed in a pub called the Great Central Hotel. You can check. They'll have records. I continued this morning, arrived in Port Silver at about eleven o'clock.'

'And you went straight to the townhouse of Mandalay Blonde at fifteen Riverside Place?'

'No, not straight away.' Martin recounts picking up the two hitchhikers, Topaz and Royce, dropping them at the backpacker hostel.

The policeman writes this information down. He has a brand-new notebook, a big one. 'Surnames?'

Martin thinks. 'Royce told me his. McAlister, I think. Not sure about the girl.'

'Never mind. We'll find them. They'll be able to corroborate your movements. Makes our job easier.' If he's pleased his eyes don't show it; they appear devoid of emotion. 'Can you say at precisely what time you dropped the couple at the hostel?'

Martin shakes his head. 'Not precisely. As I said, it was round eleven.'

The policeman looks unconvinced and Martin feels himself squirming under his gaze. The tally light on the video camera winks like a metronome. God knows how he'd be feeling if he'd actually done anything wrong.

'Mr Scarsden, we'll be accessing data from mobile phone towers that will give us a more accurate account of your movements,

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especially between Glen Innes and Port Silver. Is there any reason why we shouldn't gain access to that information?'

'No. Please do.'

The policeman stares for a long ten seconds and then writes again in his notebook, taking his time. He appears to be framing his next question when the door behind him bursts open and a young man pushes into the room, breathing hard. His hair is a mass of unkempt black wool, his stubble so dense it looks woven, his eyes black. He's wearing board shorts and sandals, chest hair erupting from beneath an erratically buttoned Hawaiian shirt.

Sergeant Pear doesn't turn immediately. Instead he waits a moment, sighs, and then swivels in his chair.

'Nick Poulos,' pants the man. 'I'm Nick Poulos.'

'I know who you are, son. What are you doing here?' asks Pear.

'I've been appointed as Mr Scarsden's lawyer.'

'Is that right?' The policeman swivels back to Martin. 'Can you confirm that?'

'No. But I'd certainly like a lawyer.'

Pear remains impassive. 'Interview adjourned at two-sixteen pm.' The constable turns the camera off. 'Okay, you two sort out your relationship. I'll give you five minutes and then we're back on.'

'Thanks, mate,' says Poulos with a huge grin, seemingly unaffected by the policeman's frostiness. Sergeant Pear and the constable leave, and Poulos turns to Martin, his arms wide as if he's about to hug him. 'Martin Scarsden. Can you believe it? Martin fucking Scarsden. Country's most famous journalist. My client!'

Martin blinks, silenced momentarily by the young man's eagerness. 'Are you sure you're a lawyer?' he asks, assessing the man's

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casual clothes, his apparent lack of years. 'Tell me you're on your day off.'

'Yeah. I was on my day off. So what? Now I'm here.'

'Who appointed you?'

'Melbourne firm. Wright, Douglas and Fenning. Rang me out of the blue. Asked me to come straight away. Top dollar.' The lawyer's eyes are wide; he's still panting, like a puppy.

Martin understands: Mandy's solicitors have appointed the solicitor, repaying Martin for alerting them of Mandy's plight. 'Why you, Nick? Why call you?'

Poulos laughs, pulling out a chair, sitting down, as if Martin has already agreed to hire him. 'Not much choice. There's one big firm here, Drake and Associates, and me. A few more up in Longton.'

'So why didn't they hire Drake?'

'They did. Drake are representing Mandalay Blonde, at least until their own people get here.'

Martin grimaces. Mandy's solicitors may be helping him out, but they're keeping his counsel discrete from her own, just in case his interests and hers don't align. Just in case they need to throw him under a bus. He looks at the lawyer, who shows no sign of settling down. 'Nick, you're not high, are you?'

'Shit no. Don't drink, don't do drugs. Can't handle that shit. Spazzes me out.'

'You do a lot of criminal law?'

'Shitloads. I'm up before the magistrate most weeks.'

'This isn't exactly one for the magistrate.'

'You're telling me. Murder. How good is that?' Poulos rubs his hands together, oblivious to the look on Martin's face. 'The Supreme Court. Shit, man, that's the big time.'

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Martin is still wondering how to respond when Pear returns.

'You two sorted then?' he asks. For the first time Martin detects some emotion seeping through the officer's taciturn hostility: amusement.

'Yes,' says Martin. 'Mr Poulos is my lawyer. For now.'

'Glad to hear it. Let's get going then.'

They resume their former positions—Martin sitting across the interview table from Pear, with the constable operating the video camera—except now Nick Poulos is sitting by Martin's side. The interview recommences, Pear an image of stillness at the centre of Martin's vision, Poulos in constant motion at its periphery. It doesn't take Martin long to recount what happened: finding the door ajar, keys in the lock, the body on the floor, the blood spreading. He tells Pear of seeing Mandy, apparently in shock, how he rang the ambulance.

'Did you see anyone enter the townhouse or leave it?' asks Pear.

'No. No one.'

'And you heard nothing? No struggle, no cry for help, nothing?'

'Nothing. It must have all finished before I arrived.'

'Yet your impression is that the attack must have only just taken place?'

'Yes. The pool of blood, it was still spreading. And when I felt for a pulse, the victim's neck felt like he could have still been alive. It was warm and pliable. Just no pulse.'

Pear engages in another of his ponderous pauses before resuming. 'And the victim . . . did you recognise him?'

'No. He was face down. Who was he?'

'Local real estate agent. Jasper Speight.'

'Jasper?' exclaims Nick Poulos. 'Fuck me.'

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But Pear isn't distracted. His eyes are boring into Martin, whose own eyes have grown wide, even as dread begins to churn within him.

'You knew him?' demands the policeman.

Martin is unable to answer immediately; something feels profoundly wrong, as if the world has shifted in its orbit. 'Yes. We went to school together. We were friends,' he manages to say. 'Good friends.'

'Is that right? Here? In Port Silver?'

'Yes. I grew up here.' A tremor runs through his hands. He holds them together to keep them still.

The policeman writes in his notebook; apparently Martin's connection to Port Silver is news to him. 'And when was the last time you saw the victim, before this morning?'

'Twenty-three years ago. As soon as I finished high school, I left town.'

'And never came back?'

'No.'

'Not ever?'

'No.'

'And no other contact with Jasper Speight in the interim? Letters, emails, phone calls?'

'No. None that I remember.'

Pear thinks that one through. 'So why come back now?'

'I'm moving back here. With my partner, Mandalay Blonde. She moved up recently.'

'When?'

'Three weeks, maybe a month. I'd have to check.'

'So why are you only just arriving?'

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'I've been holed up in Sydney, writing a book.'

'No shit!' exclaims Nick Poulos. 'About all those murders out west? Can't wait.'

Martin stares at his lawyer, incredulous, while Pear simply shakes his head. 'Mr Poulos, this is a police interview. You can get Mr Scarsden's autograph when we're finished.'

'Yes. Righto. Sorry, mate,' says Poulos, although his contrition doesn't extend to keeping still; he continues to fidget by Martin's side.

Pear returns his attention to Martin. 'Was this morning the first time you visited Mandalay Blonde's townhouse? The only time?'

'That's right.'

'And apart from the hallway, you didn't enter any other part of the house?'

'That's right.'

'And at no point did you touch the weapon?'

'There was no weapon. Not that I saw.'

'What wounds did the victim have?'

Martin needs only to close his eyes; the scene comes immediately: technicolour gore, the air flooded with the stench of blood; the body on the floor, blood still leaking.

'It looked like he'd been stabbed in the back, right in the centre. There was a circle of blood around a wound. You could see where the shirt had been sliced, the cut itself. But not so much blood. All that blood spreading on the floor, he must have been stabbed, or cut open, in his front, but I couldn't see those injuries, just the one in his back.'

'Did you touch the body?'

'Yes. I touched his neck, searching for a pulse, but that's all. That's when I got some blood on my hand.'

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'There was blood on his neck?'

'I don't know. But that's the only part of him I recall touching. And I did get blood on my hand.' Pear squints, his gaze unwavering, as if Martin's words hold great significance. Martin continues, 'He was holding something. It looked like a postcard, some sort of religious image.'

'Did you touch it?'

'No. What was it?'

Pear shakes his head, as if in sorrow. 'I can't tell you that.' Another pause. 'And you didn't go to Mandalay Blonde? You didn't try to comfort your girlfriend?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

Martin doesn't answer immediately; he doesn't know the answer. 'I can't say. I guess I was in shock. We needed help. We were out of our depth.'

'Mr Scarsden, did you kill Jasper Speight?'

'Steady on,' interjects Nick Poulos.

'It's okay,' says Martin. 'Let's have it on the record. I most certainly did not kill Jasper Speight or harm him in any way. He was dead when I arrived.'

'Very good,' says Pear, although there is nothing in his tone to suggest Martin's response is good, bad or indifferent. He asks several more questions, mainly about Mandy's appearance and her attitude, then brings the official interview to an end. The constable turns the camera off, extracts its memory card and takes it with her as she leaves the room.

Pear remains seated, waiting until his subordinate has closed the door behind her before he speaks again, voice more matter-of-fact

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than menacing. 'This is a murder inquiry. Homicide will be arriving from Sydney any time now, so they'll be taking over. They wanted your recollections on the record as soon as possible. We'll need to detain you until they get here.' He turns to Poulos. 'You understand that isn't my call?'

'My client is cooperating fully. He rang the police. You don't need to detain him,' says the young lawyer. 'He didn't witness the murder.'

Pear addresses Martin, not Nick Poulos. 'I'll be talking to homicide. It's their call. We'll get on to tracking your phone and I'll get down to the backpackers to confirm your alibi. The forensic team from Sydney are also flying in, although some of their equipment is coming by road. We may need to hold you overnight.'

'Not good enough,' says Poulos, almost cheerfully. 'Unless you intend charging him, he needs to be out of here by—' he checks his watch for effect '—let's say six-thirty. Okay?'

The policeman regards the lawyer for a moment. Martin thinks he's starting to detect subtle changes in Pear's face; is that contempt penetrating the mask? 'That's right, son. We can only hold him for four hours. Plus any time it reasonably takes to conduct forensic procedures. Which may mean until tomorrow. As I say, it's homicide's call. They'll be here soon enough; you can argue the toss with them.'

Pear stands, but before he moves to the door he speaks again, this time addressing Martin. 'Know this. Your lawyer here seems to view those murders down in the Riverina as something of a lark. I'm sure you don't. As a police officer, I'm grateful for the assistance you gave in bringing a murderer to justice. But one policeman lost his life and another will be going to prison. Do not

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expect me to be doing you any favours.' Pear gives him a withering glare, extends it to Nick Poulos, then heads towards the door.

'What about Mandy?' Martin asks, almost too late. 'How is she?'

'Sorry,' says Pear over his shoulder, sounding anything but, 'not my call.'

It's a new cell, fresh and sterile, scrubbed clean of graffiti and misery, smelling of disinfectant, not piss. It boasts a solid metal door with a small hatch at eye level, giving him a sense of privacy even as a video camera, peering down from high in one corner, insists he has none at all. Martin remembers the old cells, reeking of shit and vomit, the marinated aftermath of lives gone wrong. No cameras back then, but no pretence at privacy either: one wall nothing but steel bars fronting the corridor beyond. He'd been locked up a few times, for teenage drunkenness and tomfoolery, put away for the night for his own good by old Sergeant Mackie, dispenser of arbitrary justice. No magistrate's court for him, no habeas corpus, just Martin and Jasper and sometimes Scotty, detained at Mackie's pleasure, released with a flea in the ear and a boot up the arse.

What was it they had done? That night with Scotty? Drunk too much grog, that much was a given. Goon bags and shoplifted Bundy. And dope? Probably. Jasper liked dope. It starts coming back.

They're in the supermarket car park, up on its flat roof, sitting out of sight below its ramparts, drinking and talking and laughing. It's night time. They're maybe sixteen, the bodies of men and the minds of children. Drunken children. The shopping trolleys are just sitting there, waiting to tempt them. Jasper starts it, climbing into one, demanding to be pushed.

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In his cell, Martin closes his eyes, hears the sound of the trolley rattling over the gaps in the concrete, clanking like a train, feels the vibrations in his hands.

They take turns pushing each other, narrowly missing light poles, crashing into kerbs. Martin sent flying, banging his knee and scraping his elbow, inspiring unmitigated laughter. The three of them on the ground, laughing, holding their stomachs, tears in their eyes, captive to the moment. It doesn't hurt; not his knee, not his bloodied elbow. How drunk is he?

Now Jasper wants to race, challenges them, but it's not possible, not with just the three of them. And then the inevitable idea. It doesn't matter who suggests it; it's immediately embraced: a race down the ramp from the roof. So they line up their wire-framed chariots, climb in, count down and push off, accelerating quickly, screaming with exhilaration, careening out of control, all three of them crashing, only Scotty still screaming, his arm broken and his tooth missing. Jasper and Martin ploughing headlong into a parked car—the mayor's car—thrown out of the trolleys by the impact, lucky not to be more seriously hurt.

Martin smiles at the memory and wonders at it. Were they really that reckless? That wild? He hasn't thought of it for years, but then he hasn't thought about anything to do with Port Silver for years. Deliberately so. And now Jasper is dead. Twenty-five years since the supermarket and dead on arrival, Martin's arrival. Jasper, with his mop of dark hair and twinkling blue eyes, always up for a laugh, ready with a quip, riding his luck. Chatting up the girls with his cheesy lines, just for the fun of it, surprised when they flirted back. Jasper. Stabbed to death, emptied of blood, with no more luck to ride.

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Scotty ends up in hospital, Jasper and Martin in the slammer. And then Jasper is going, his mother Denise rushing in to collect him, grounding him for a month. Jasper winks at Martin as he leaves, giving him a conspiratorial smirk, uninjured and still drunk. And now Martin is alone, the pain returning first to his elbow and then to his knee, before spreading to his head, imposing a regime of suffering. He tries lying down, but his head begins to spin. He sits up, fighting back the urge to vomit. No one is coming to collect him, to ground him; only Mackie will discipline him. But he's not scared, not intimidated—it isn't the first time. On some other night he'll be the one at home and his father will be in here sleeping off a big one, their roles reversed.

Martin opens his eyes, trawls his memory; when did he resolve to stop drinking, promising himself that he would never become his father? One night in the cells, drunk and miserable, or one morning waking with a heavy head, a dry mouth and a rebellious stomach? Old Mackie appearing with breakfast, bacon and eggs floating in a pool of grease, before sending him on his way, telling him that he never wants to see him again. Maybe the message had eventually got through? No, Martin knows when it was. That night out in the Settlement, the night his father died. He stands up, paces, putting the memories away, back where they belong. It shouldn't be too long until he's released; he can leave them in here.

There's the sound of movement outside the cell. Martin peers through the hatch. The curve of her neck, a flash of her hair, no longer blonde.

'Mandy!' he calls.

She pauses, looks back, trying to locate his voice. She's holding her boy, Liam, asleep in her arms. She manages a wan smile, eyes

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burdened. A timid wave, gaze slightly off centre, looking at the wrong door. Then she's gone, escorted away by the same constable who had operated the video camera.

Martin sits down on the cell bed. There's a thin mattress and nothing else. No pillow, no blanket. She smiled, he's sure she smiled. And Liam is safe. A wave of emotion hits him: relief, longing, a compulsion to protect her and her boy. He feels it roll over him, unsure of his emotional footing. At the age of forty-one he's still getting used to this, these surges of emotion, this undertow of affection. Once, not so long ago, he'd been in control, sailing a placid sea, oblivious to the currents and tides pulsing beneath. Now, closer to the shore, the waves can catch him unawares. He looks at the painted wall, breathes deeply, letting the emotion ebb.

The police will soon clear him, but they'll need to investigate Mandy. An image comes to him of her sitting on the couch, quietly going into shock, hands bloodied. What would the police make of that? They'll ask if she sliced Speight open then finished him with one violent blow, plunging a blade into his heart. Martin knows it can't be true; in the Riverina, she'd held a knife to a killer's throat, a man about to slaughter her defenceless child. She hadn't killed then, under the most extreme provocation, so he can't believe she would kill now, not even in self-defence. Not the final blow, the fatal blow. Not when the victim was already so seriously wounded. Not when he'd turned his back.

But if Mandy wasn't the killer, who was? Martin realises she mustn't know. If she had witnessed the murder, if she had seen the killer, she would have told the police by now and Martin wouldn't still be in custody. So she must have arrived after the fact, only

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shortly before Martin. Maybe she had heard something and come downstairs to find Jasper dead, just before Martin arrived.

And yet he hadn't gone to her; he'd left her sitting bewildered and lost; he'd stayed in the hallway, awaiting the police. She'd needed him but he hadn't moved. What had immobilised him? Another image comes to him: Jasper Speight with his blood pooling about him. No longer a body, but Jasper. Martin trembles involuntarily and fights the urge to be sick, no longer the dispassionate and impervious foreign correspondent.

Sergeant Mackie and the old police station may be long gone, but the breakfast remains unchanged. The same eggs, the same fatty bacon, the same layer of grease. This time around Martin declines; he's not hungover and he's not broke. A second police constable, a young bloke yet to shed the last of his puppy fat, seems to take it personally. 'That's good food, mate. You know that? Plenty would be grateful for it.'

'You eat it then. All yours.'

'I will at that,' says the constable defiantly, taking the plate back. The puppy fat will linger a while yet.

'Hello, Martin. Not hungry?' It's Detective Inspector Morris Montifore, replacing the constable in the doorway. Only six weeks have passed since Martin helped the homicide detective solve a set of brutal murders in the state's parched interior, more than a thousand kilometres from Port Silver. And now here he is again, an unexpected encore. He can't be much older than Martin, but he looks fatigued, the creases on his forehead permanent, as if he's witnessed too much. Perhaps he has.

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'Morris. Fancy seeing you here.'

'I was thinking the same thing.' The homicide detective's eyes are alert. Alert and amused.

'I have a lawyer, you know,' says Martin. 'I want him here if you're going to interview me.'

Montifore smiles. 'No need. You're free to go. Sorry you were kept overnight, but we needed to tick all the boxes. This is just a courtesy call.'

'You have the killer?'

'Not yet.'

'But your forensic team, they've put me in the clear?'

Montifore shakes his head. 'This is a police matter. A murder investigation. I don't want you muddying the waters, you understand? That's the courtesy part of the call: don't get involved, leave it to us. Okay?'

'What about Mandy? Is she free to go as well?'

'She's already out. Let her go last night. Better lawyers, I guess.'

Martin doesn't bite. 'Her boy. Is he okay?'

Montifore grows serious. 'He is. Now come on, I'll walk you to the desk and get you signed out. But I'll need to talk to you again. And to her.'

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