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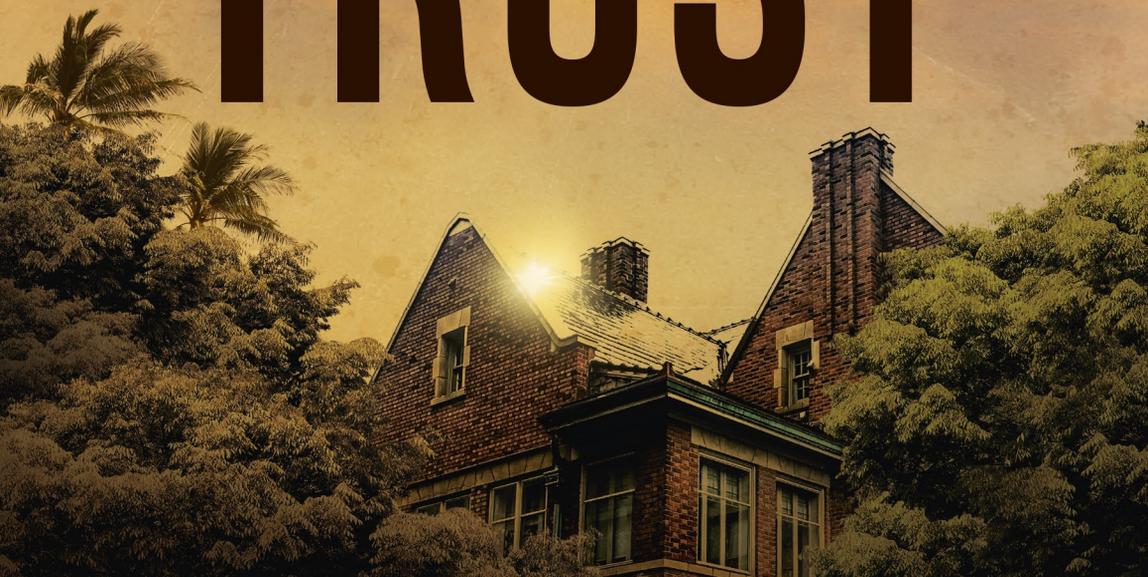
MICHAEL CONNELLY

HE VIOLATED HER PAST
AND HAUNTS HER PRESENT.
NOW HE'S THREATENING THEIR FUTURE.

CHRIS HAMMER

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SCRUBLANDS*

TRUST



PRAISE FOR **SILVER**

‘Chris Hammer is a great writer—a leader in Australian noir.’ **Michael Connelly**

‘A terrific story . . . an excellent sequel; the best Australian crime novel since Peter Temple’s *The Broken Shore*.’ ***The Times***

‘Elegantly executed on all fronts, *Silver* has a beautifully realised sense of place . . . There’s a lot going on in Port Silver, but it’s well worth a visit.’ ***Sydney Morning Herald/The Age***

‘The immediacy of the writing makes for heightened tension, and the book is as heavy on the detail as it is on conveying Scarsden’s emotional state. *Silver* is a dramatic blood-pumper of a book for lovers of Sarah Bailey and Dave Warner.’ ***Books + Publishing***

‘Hammer has shown in *Silver* that *Scrublands* was no fluke. He has taken what he learnt in that novel and built on it to create a deeper, richer experience. He has delivered a real sense of place and uses the crime genre to explore some very real current social issues and character types.’ ***PS News***

‘A taut and relentless thriller—just jump into the rapids and hold on.’ ***Readings***

‘The action unfolds at the same breathless pace as it did in *Scrublands* . . . Hammer’s prose brings the coastal setting vividly to life. An engrossing read, perfect for the summer holidays.’ ***The Advertiser***

‘An enthralling, atmospheric thriller that fans of Aussie crime won’t be able to put down.’ ***New Idea***

‘Fast paced, enthralling, enjoyable, utterly engaging and very easy to relate to, *Silver* has confirmed Hammer’s place in the list of people who really can write a seriously good story.’ **Blue Wolf Reviews**

PRAISE FOR **SCRUBLANDS**

‘Hammer has travelled back roads and inland waterways. His depictions are unsentimental, without false cheer, but never dismissive. He is nonetheless assaying a part of Australia that is dying, slowly and fatalistically. Thus threnody blends with crime drama in one of the finest novels of the year.’ **Peter Pierce**, *The Australian*

‘Vivid and mesmerising . . . Stunning . . . *Scrublands* is that rare combination, a page-turner that stays long in the memory.’ *Sunday Times*
Crime Book of the Month

‘So does *Scrublands* earn its Thriller of the Year tag? Absolutely. Is it my favourite book of the year so far? Well, it’s only June but since you’re asking, at this very moment, yes it is . . . Deliberately paced and wound tight, this book will keep you awake until you’ve finished the final page. And maybe even after that. It’s relentless, it’s compulsive, it’s a book you simply can’t put down.’ *Written by Sime*

‘Brilliant and unsettling, *Scrublands* stands at the junction of Snowtown and *Wake in Fright*, that place where Australia’s mirage of bush tranquillity evaporated into our hidden fears.’ **Paul Daley**, *journalist and author of Challenge*

‘A superbly drawn, utterly compelling evocation of a small town riven by a shocking crime.’ **Mark Brandi**, *author of Wimmera*

‘A clever, intricate mystery . . . a complex, compelling story deeply rooted in its small-town setting. Highly recommended.’ **Dervla McTiernan**, *author of The Ruin*

‘*Scrublands* kidnapped me for 48 hours. I was hopelessly lost in the scorching Australian landscape, disoriented but completely immersed in the town and people of Riversend, as the heat crackled off the pages. I was devastated when it was time to go back to the real world. This book is a force of nature. A must-read for all crime fiction fans.’ **Sarah Bailey**, *author of The Dark Lake and Into the Night*

‘A brilliant read. A thriller that crackles and sweats and a powerful portrait of a small town on the edge.’ **Michael Brissenden, journalist and author of *The List***

‘Stellar . . . Richly descriptive writing coupled with deeply developed characters, relentless pacing, and a bombshell-laden plot make this whodunit virtually impossible to put down.’ ***Publishers Weekly*, starred review**

‘Hammer’s portrait of a dying, drought-struck town numbed by a priest’s unimaginable act of violence will capture you from the first explosive page and refuse to let go until the last. His remarkable writing takes you inside lives twisted by secrets festering beneath the melting heat of the inland, the scrub beyond waiting to burst into flame. *Scrublands* is the read of the year. Unforgettable.’ **Tony Wright, *The Age/Sydney Morning Herald***

‘Immersive and convincing . . . This will be the novel that all crime fiction fans will want . . . a terrific read that has “bestseller” written all over it.’ ***Australian Crime Fiction***

‘Debut thriller of the month (and maybe of 2019) . . . Beautifully written.’ ***Washington Post***

‘Chris Hammer’s powerful debut *Scrublands* establishes his place among the handful of thriller writers who understand the importance of setting as character, deftly weaving the story of a landscape burned dry and a town whose residents are barely hanging on with a complicated mystery that could only happen in this place in exactly the way Hammer tells it. Fresh and hypnotic, complex and layered, *Scrublands*’ gorgeous prose swept me up and carried me toward a conclusion that was both surprising and inevitable. I loved every word. Highly recommended.’ **Karen Dionne, international bestselling author of *The Marsh King’s Daughter***

‘. . . desolate, dangerous, and combustible. A complex novel powered by a cast of characters with motives and loyalties as ever-shifting as the dry riverbed beneath them, Hammer’s story catches fire from the first page.’ **J. Todd Scott, author of *High White Sun***

‘Impressive prose and brilliant plotting . . . a remarkable study of human fallibility, guilt, remorse, hope and redemption. The descriptions of landscape are often evocative and Winton-like, with the parched country-town setting reminiscent of Jane Harper’s *The Dry* . . . It is hard to imagine *Scrublands* not being loved by all crime/mystery fans. FIVE STARS.’ **Scott Whitmont, *Books + Publishing***

‘There is a very good reason people are calling *Scrublands* the “thriller of the year”. This impressive debut is a powerful and compulsively readable Australian crime novel.’ ***Booktopia***

‘As one bookseller commented, *Scrublands* is another sign we are in a Golden Age of Australian crime. Reading it is a pulsating, intense experience, not to be missed.’ ***Better Reading***

‘Much like the bushfire that flares up in the mulga, *Scrublands* quickly builds in intensity, until it’s charging along with multiple storylines, unanswered questions and uncovered truths. It is a truly epic read.’ ***Good Reading***

‘Shimmers with heat from the sun and from the passions that drive a tortured tale of blood and loss.’ **Val McDermid, author of *How the Dead Speak***

‘A dark and brilliant thriller, one that lingers in the mind.’ ***Mail On Sunday***

‘Extremely accomplished . . . Deliciously noirish . . . Set in the blistering heat of a remote Australian town ravaged by drought and threatened by bushfires, this is a complex, meaty, intelligent mystery . . . Well-rounded characters, masterful plotting and real breadth; this is an epic and immersive read. Hammer’s writing is so evocative the heat practically rises off the pages of *Scrublands*.’ ***Guardian UK***

‘Incendiary . . . A rattling good read, ambitious in scale and scope and delivering right up to the last, powerfully moving page.’ ***Irish Times***

Chris Hammer was a journalist for more than thirty years, dividing his career between covering Australian federal politics and international affairs. For many years he was a roving foreign correspondent for SBS TV's flagship current affairs program *Dateline*. He has reported from more than thirty countries on six continents. In Canberra, roles included chief political correspondent for *The Bulletin*, current affairs correspondent for SBS TV and a senior political journalist for *The Age*.

His first book, *The River*, published in 2010 to critical acclaim, was the recipient of the ACT Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Walkley Book Award and the Manning Clark House National Cultural Award. *Scrublands*, his first novel, was published in 2018 and was shortlisted for Best Debut Fiction at the Indie Book Awards, shortlisted for Best General Fiction at the Australian Book Industry Awards, shortlisted for the UTS Glenda Adams Award for New Writing at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and won the UK Crime Writers' Association John Creasey Debut Dagger Award. His second novel, *Silver*, was published in 2019 and was shortlisted for Best General Fiction at the Australian Book Industry Awards, shortlisted for the 2020 ABA Booksellers' Choice Book of the Year, and longlisted for the UK Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger Award.

Chris has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Charles Sturt University and a master's degree in international relations from the Australian National University. He lives in Canberra with his wife, Dr Tomoko Akami. The couple have two children.

CHRIS
HAMMER
TRUST

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
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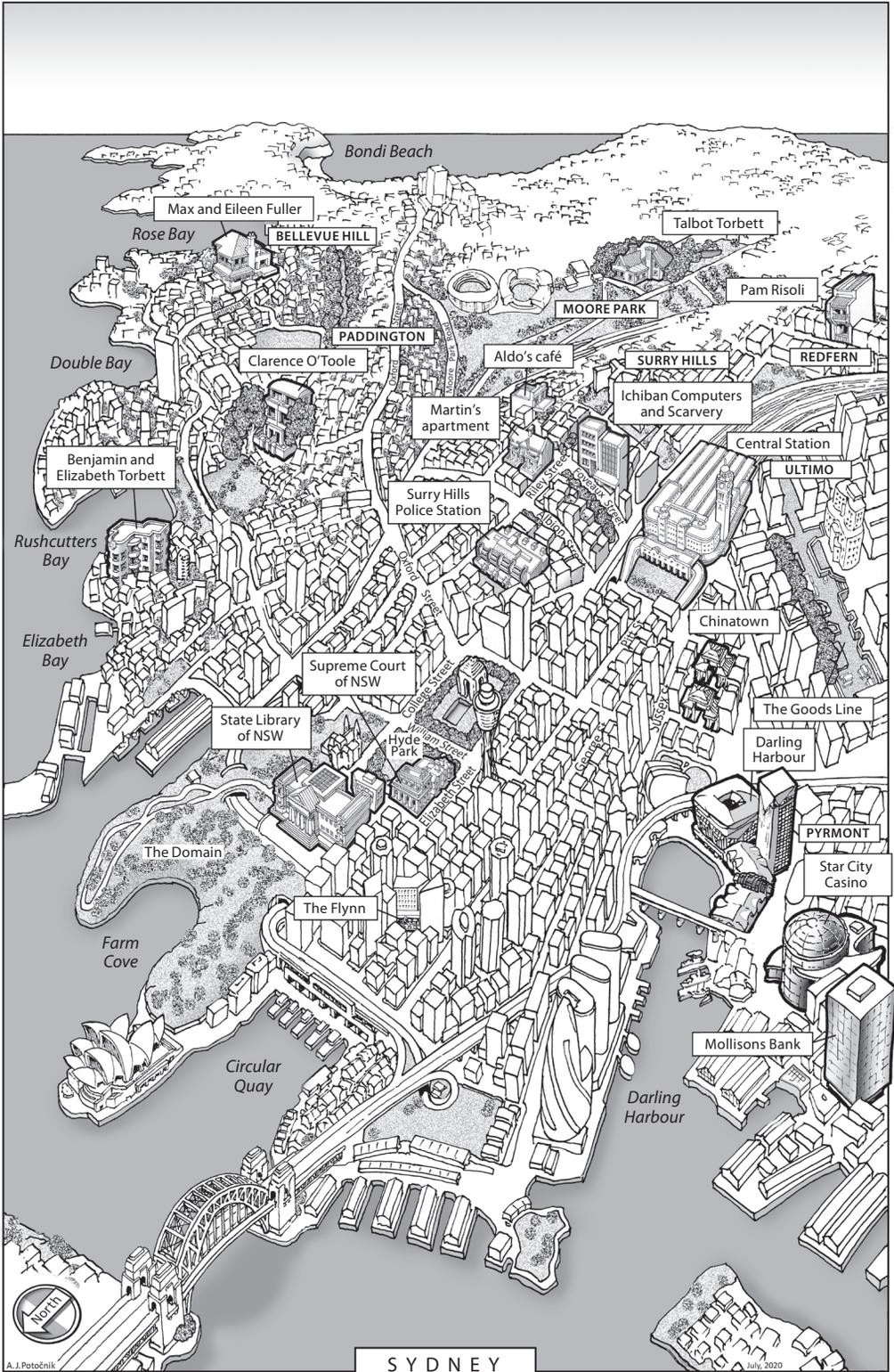
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A. J. Potocnik

SYDNEY

July, 2020

prologue

THE REALISATION SWELLS WITHIN HIM, LIKE A BIRTHING. IT'S HAPPENING RIGHT now, today, in this moment of time, in this sliver of history. After months of gestation—after all the connections and the cultivations, all the plotting and the intrigues, all the threats and the blackmail—it's this simple. He's going to get away with it. The files are downloading, faster than he could ever have imagined, transcribing the guilt, the corruption, the criminality, all neatly packaged, all digitised, all pre-digested, pouring from the computer through a supposedly disabled USB port onto the bright blue thumb drive, encryption broken, the truth laid bare, the drive itself hidden by nothing more than his bravado and a takeaway coffee cup. He stands and looks around, his mind electric but his exterior calm, the consummate actor. The consummate spy. He smiles—but, then, he is always smiling.

The trading floor is a hive of activity, brokers swarming, abuzz with corporate fervour and personal ambition, banks of monitors alive with bonds and equities and derivatives and exchange rates, all fluid, all flickering, all demanding their attention. Simply by standing still, he's rendered himself invisible. No one is looking at him, no one cares about his monitor, they're all focused on their own ephemera: numbers and charts and transactions; losses, margins and gains. He feels he is the only point of stillness, the cyclone swirling about him, that he alone possesses the perspective to know what is truly happening across these epochal seconds. It completes his victory; carried out in plain sight, the audacity of it, his own subterfuge disguised by the bank's own much larger deception. It will make the retelling all the better; this will be the making of him, the stuff of legends. He catches a reflection of himself, only slightly distorted, in the surface of a golden wall panel. He's pleased with what he sees: hair bouffant, face tanned, eyes bright and teeth even. He likes his face; everyone likes his face. It's a likeable face. More importantly, it's a trustworthy face.

The transfer is almost done. He lifts the coffee. It tastes excellent. Through the windows of the office tower, he can see the perfect Sydney day, blue and white, the sun pouring benevolence across the skyline, harbour alight, as if the city itself approves the righteousness of his actions.

He looks back to the computer, startled to see it's finished. Already. He blinks, savouring the moment, this tipping point, this culmination. If nothing else, he'll miss the bank's state-of-the-art tech, so much faster and efficient than the antiquated systems at his real workplace. He sits. Quickly, he imposes his own encryption on the thumb drive, then runs a purpose-built program to cover

his tracks. It takes mere minutes. Then he ejects the drive, pockets it and logs off. Done.

‘Early lunch?’ he asks, pausing at the cubicle of Raff, the shift supervisor—the one person he knows won’t accept his invitation.

‘Sorry. Bit under the pump,’ says Raff, not lifting his eyes from his screens. ‘Maybe later in the week.’

‘No worries,’ says Tarquin, grinning at his colleague’s predictability. ‘I’ll be an hour or so. You want anything?’

‘No. Brought my lunch in.’

‘Okay, see you, then.’

And Tarquin Molloy walks away, his gait confident, as always; his eyes shining, as always; his smile every bit as generous and unflappable as on his first day here. But inside, his stomach is churning and his mind is bubbling with what he has achieved.

He enters the lift, hits the button for the lobby, for glory, taking one last look across the trading floor as the doors begin to close, the curtains falling on the final scene. He commits it to memory, for the recounting. Then, at the last, an arm reaches in, forcing the doors open. Tarquin Molloy beams at the newcomer, a tall man, thin and dressed in a vintage suit of coarse brown wool. The doors ease shut.

‘Morning,’ says the gentleman, inviting engagement.

‘It certainly is,’ he replies. And to Tarquin, he *does* look like a gentleman. The suit is three-piece, of heavy cloth, as if it’s been transported from somewhere in the mid-twentieth century, immaculately maintained despite its age. There is a patterned kerchief in the suit’s breast pocket and a Legacy badge on its lapel. The man’s face is long, as is his hair, oiled so it stays in place behind his ears. The hair oil, or something, has a pleasant aroma in the

confined space. The smell, like the suit and the man's demeanour, is old-fashioned. His complexion is touched with sepia. A smoker, thinks Tarquin. Old for a trading floor.

'California Poppy,' says the man.

'Sorry?'

'The hair oil. California Poppy.'

'It smells very nice.'

'Thank you,' says the man genially. One of his teeth has a gold cap. 'Hard to come by nowadays.'

The lift shudders to a halt, but the doors don't open. They're stuck between floors.

'That's strange,' says Tarquin.

'You don't know the half of it,' says the man in the brown suit. He unbuttons his coat and withdraws a revolver. A six-gun, a prop from a Western, a massive thing, matt black and menacing, its handle inlaid with pearl shell. Tarquin's stomach plummets and his mind begins to reel. The muzzle is pointed at his chest.

SUNDAY

chapter one

THE BOY IS LAUGHING WITH THE JOY OF IT, THE SENSATION OF IT, SLAPPING AT the sea water with his hands, sending it spraying about him. Martin laughs too; Liam's pleasure is contagious. They're side by side, the man and the infant, sitting in a briny puddle formed when Martin scooped out sand to build a castle, now demolished. The excavation won't last much longer either, its sides slowly collapsing as another wave rolls up the beach, the tide on its way back in. *Splat, splat, splat*, go Liam's pudgy hands. *Splat, splat, splat*, go Martin's as he emulates his stepson, inciting more delight. Oh, how he loves the boy's laugh, that distinctive chortle that has always been his and his alone, pre-dating words.

Martin can hear his phone ringing in the beach bag further up the sand, below the steps to the house, but he doesn't move, doesn't consider answering it. Nothing is urgent here, not anymore. The days of subjugation, to the dictates of phone calls and editors,

to deadlines and scoops, to egos and rivalries, are past. For sixteen months they've lived here at Port Silver—Martin, Mandalay and Liam—repairing their house on the cliffs above the beach, repairing their lives. Constructing a new and more robust reality, quarantined from the past.

'Marn. Look. Marn!'

'What?'

'Whale! Marn, whale!' The boy is on his feet, pointing excitedly out beyond the bar where the river meets the ocean. Martin hears it before he sees it, the exhalation of breath, the fizzing spray of a mist, the whale's blow. And now, as if to greet them, one white fin rises from the water, waving as it catches the early afternoon sun.

'Humpback. It's a humpback,' says Martin, smiling broadly, but Liam is too busy waving back to attempt the word.

The phone rings again. And again he ignores it. This mid-winter day is too perfect to lose: the sky clear, the day warm, the sea gentle. Even on the far north coast of New South Wales, winter southerlies can bite, bringing rain and cold. Days like this, the first after a week of cloud and squalls, are not to be interrupted. But when the phone rings for a third time, insistent, he knows he must answer it. Nobody rings three times unless it's urgent.

'Right back,' he says to Liam as he stands. He moves up the beach, no more than twenty metres. He walks backwards, not taking his eyes from the boy. Liam is well past two, twenty-seven months, a real toddler, walking and talking. Even so, Martin is taking no chances, not with the boy close to the water. Still looking at Liam, he picks up his phone and answers the call. 'Martin Scarsden.'

‘Martin. Long time.’

‘Max?’ Martin takes a quick glance at the screen, shading it from the sun, confirming it’s his former editor, his old mentor, Max Fuller.

‘Where are you? Port Silver?’

‘Yes, on the beach.’

‘Lucky you. How’s work?’

‘Yeah, good. The book’s doing well, the one about the killings up here last year.’

‘Good. So you’re at a loose end?’

‘Lot to be said for that, Max.’

‘I’ve got wind of a big story. A cracker. I could do with your help.’

Martin hesitates before responding; he still feels residual guilt for his part in Max being stripped of the *Herald*’s editorship. Liam has plopped back onto his bare arse and is splashing about in the puddle. Since when would Max need his help? ‘You don’t mean just a feature, do you? You wouldn’t need me for that.’

‘It’s early days, but this could be huge. An investigative series. A book as well.’

‘What is it?’

‘Not on the phone. You in Sydney anytime soon?’

‘I wasn’t planning to be.’

‘Well, see if you can make it down. Don’t wait too long.’

Liam is standing again, taking a few unsteady steps towards the sea, apparently intent on paddling.

‘Okay. But don’t take it for granted I’ll come on board.’

‘You will when you see what I’ve got. We’re not talking about a few pissy murders here, son. We’re talking grand conspiracy. I promise you, you’ll want in.’

‘Okay. I’ll talk to Mandy, see what I can do. Sorry I didn’t pick up first time.’

There’s a pause. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Wasn’t that you ringing just a moment ago?’

‘Not me.’

‘Okay. I’ll be in touch.’ Martin ends the call and checks his phone. Sure enough, the two previous calls were from Mandy: his partner, Liam’s mum. Unusual for her to call; she usually texts. Liam is heading towards him now, holding up a seashell.

‘Mumma,’ says the lad.

‘She’ll love it.’ It’s something Mandy and Liam do together, collect shells on the beach below their house.

Martin looks back at his phone; she’s left a voice message. He opens it, holds the phone to his ear. But it’s not words, it’s a scream: one long shriek, full of desperation and danger, ten seconds long. It cuts through the tranquillity of the day like a blade. It doesn’t finish; instead it ends abruptly, as if cut off.

‘Fuck,’ says Martin.

‘Fuck,’ says Liam, the irrepressible mimic.

Martin is already moving. He lifts the infant and starts running towards the stairs behind the beach, leaving everything else behind, taking only his son and his phone, nothing else matters.

Almost instantly the boy is crying, shocked by the rough handling, but Martin doesn’t care, not now. He reaches the steps carved into the sandstone, leading up to their clifftop house, starts bounding up, the boy squirming and wailing. Up they go. Ten metres, twenty. Martin is breathing hard, slowed by Liam’s weight. The steps finish at a zigzagging path. He scrambles along to the start of another flight, wooden stairs this time, suspended from

a near vertical rockface. He doesn't hesitate; up they go, the boy becoming sullen and silent.

The stairs end. They're close now. Another couple of switch-backs through the rainforest, the rise not as steep, and the house appears through the foliage. He stops again. He can see nothing wrong, nothing unusual; he can hear nothing other than the noise of his own panting and the now distant sound of the surf . . . No, wait. There. Just visible around the corner of their home: a white car. *Shit*. Someone is in the house. He pauses, torn. Mandy's scream is still reverberating around his skull, but he can't take Liam in there, into possible danger. *Shit*. Then he knows what to do.

'Drive, Liam.'

He jogs up to the house, hoping no one is watching, still holding his stepson firmly. Ducking down below the windows, he moves along the building's side. He pauses at the corner, peering around it to where the unfamiliar car is parked. An SUV. New. Queensland number plates. A rental? He steps quickly past it to Mandy's Subaru, sitting unlocked in the shade of some trees. He places Liam in the booster seat and fastens the belt.

'Drive!' enthuses Liam.

'Soon. I'll be back soon. You wait here, okay?'

'Mumma?'

'Yes. I'll get Mumma.'

Liam looks uncertain, but there is no time to reassure him. Leaving the car door open—even in winter, a locked car can grow dangerously hot—Martin scuttles to the house, sheltering below the kitchen window. He looks back: the open door is out of sight on the far side of the car; Liam is silent and almost impossible to see. Martin turns his full attention to the house. He can hear

nothing unusual; just the wind, the surf and birdsong. How can the birds be so insensitive? Didn't they hear her scream?

He eases the kitchen door open and slides inside. There is no sound, a stillness has settled. The door to the dining room is open. Again, nothing. No: there is, there is. On the table: her phone. The one she screamed into. She must be here; she wouldn't leave her phone.

He moves through the room, looks around the open doorway into the living room . . . And sees a man in a suit face down on the floor. Adrenaline hits him, and his already surging heart-beat accelerates. He tries to listen for the sound of an intruder, but the blood in his ears is too loud; that and the memory of Mandy's scream. He takes a breath and edges forward, knowing he's exposing himself, knowing he may be walking into danger. But she's in jeopardy; standing still is not an option.

Nothing happens. There is no one else. He moves to the body, squats, feels for a pulse. It's there, in the neck, strong and consistent. The man is alive. Martin can hear him breathing: a little ragged, but steady enough. There is blood seeping from the back of his skull, out through his hair. There is no other sign of injury. Someone has king hit him from behind, laid him flat. Did Mandy do this, knock the man unconscious? Where *is* Mandy? Martin needs to get upstairs, explore the rest of the house, try to find her. But first he rolls the man onto his side, into the recovery position. He's a dead weight, showing no sign of waking. Only when Martin has him in position does he look at his face—and is shocked to recognise him. It's Claus Vandenbruk, the ill-tempered policeman Martin encountered a year and a half ago in far western New South Wales. What the hell is Vandenbruk doing here? Back

then, Vandenbruk was on secondment to the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, the ACIC; he'd played a major role in bringing down an organised crime syndicate. What is he doing here? The questions flood Martin's mind, but he dismisses them: right now he needs to get help, and he needs to find Mandy.

He dials triple zero, asks for the police, explains quickly, voice low, what he's found, requests that police and ambulance both attend, warning that there is the potential for danger, that the police should enter first. The dispatcher starts to ask questions, but Martin can't afford to wait any longer. He interrupts to tell them of the boy in the car—if anything happens to him, at least they'll find Liam. Then he hangs up and starts moving towards the stairs.