

chapter one

MARTIN

MARTIN IS LAUGHING, MANDY IS LAUGHING, LIAM IS LAUGHING. HE'LL REMEMBER it later, the joy in the car that night, the sense that all was right with the world, that they were on a trajectory safe and true, the frailties of fate not apparent. Now, in the moment, the whole family is celebrating. They're in the Subaru, heading into Port Silver for the launch of Martin's latest book, a true-crime exposé: *Melbourne Mobster: The Vivid Life and Violent Death of Enzo Marelli*.

Martin himself feels a sense of anticipation, the work done, that hiatus between the last edit and publication over at last. It has been a difficult gestation, plagued with lawyers, every sentence checked and double-checked, eliminating anything defamatory, anything actionable, eradicating the risk of sub judice and contempt, purging anything that might betray sources or expose innocents to potential harm. Write an exposé on organised crime and that's what you can expect. That and the death threats.

'How you feeling?' asks Mandy from the driver's seat, even as she concentrates on navigating their crumbling track of a driveway.

‘Relieved. Wasn’t sure it would see the light of day.’ He recalls other projects, one book in particular, where the threat of legal action was too much, the weight of money too intimidating, when the publisher had buckled. A lot of work wasted, a lot of stress for nothing. Not this time. Enzo Marelli was gone, the godfather, the threat of defamation evaporating with his assassination. His heirs, the younger generation, were intent on moving on, evolving towards the corporate and away from the criminal, presenting a more polished and professional and benign image.

‘It’s already making quite the splash,’ says Mandy, pulling out onto the main road leading into town.

‘Hope so. After all we’ve endured.’ He reaches across, hand lightly brushing her shoulder. ‘Thank you. For everything.’ In the back seat, seven-year-old Liam is listening intently.

Martin basks in the moment, watches the world ease by. Across the bridge, into town, the sunset flaring above the escarpment. No matter the sense of accomplishment the book gives him, he knows it’s nothing compared to what he has found here in Port Silver with Mandy and Liam. This life. Surrounded by family and friends, a community. He thinks back to the man he once was, the anchorless foreign correspondent, the lone wolf, the lost soul. That younger man would have been so impressed by the book, by the other books, but would have been oblivious to the real achievement of this older self.

Having the launch in Port Silver means he has been able to invite some of the locals, the friends he and Mandy have made since moving to the coastal town six years ago—his uncle Vern and family, the lawyer Nick Poulos, their neighbours Bede and Alexander—before he hits the big city events, the TV and radio interviews, the bookshop signings and writers’ festivals.

They park on the roof of the supermarket and walk down towards the surf club, to the small community hall out the back, a converted boatshed sheltering in the lee of the new clubhouse.

Jack Goffing is waiting for them outside the hall, the ASIO man in casual clothes—city casual in neatly pressed trousers and a sports jacket, not the cheesecloth casual of the coast.

He and Martin shake hands. ‘Thanks for coming, Jack. Means a lot.’

‘Wouldn’t miss it.’

Goffing leans across, pats Liam on the head, exchanges an air kiss with Mandy.

She pulls back abruptly, frowning. ‘Jack? Are you armed?’

‘Oh yeah. Sorry about that.’ He pats his jacket to the left of his chest. ‘Regulations.’

Martin’s ingrained scepticism kicks in. ‘Regulations?’

‘I didn’t think ASIO carried weapons,’ Mandy says. ‘All cloak, no dagger.’

‘I’m on secondment. Federal police. We’re required to carry.’

‘On your day off?’ says Mandy.

Martin shares her puzzlement. They’re in a country town, a coastal backwater. Nothing ever happens here. Well, not since the dramatic events when they first arrived. But before Martin can pursue it, they’re joined by Ivan Lucic and Nell Buchanan, the Homicide detectives whose investigations linked the Riverina town of Yuwonderie to the Melbourne underworld, the catalyst for Martin’s book. They all greet each other.

‘Nice to be back,’ says Ivan. ‘Place seems to be booming.’

‘Maybe too much,’ says Mandy. ‘We’ll end up like Byron before we know it.’

Mandy's tone is light, but Martin recognises her unease. The two Homicide detectives are also wearing jackets despite the warmth of the evening. It's the New South Wales north coast; no one wears jackets at this time of year. At any time of year.

Instinctively he glances around for Liam, sees him playing chase with another boy his own age. Martin chastises himself: he's always overthinking. He needs to go with the flow, to enjoy the evening. What the police do is their business.

The guests are gathering inside, a buzz growing as people make their way to the bar for free drinks. The local bookseller, down from Longton, has set up next to the drinks, piles of books on a trestle table. Martin pushes across, thanks her for making the effort, promises to stick around to sign copies afterwards. He picks up the book, holds it for a moment, savours it. The designer has done a great job with the cover: it's sinister but not too confronting, more intriguing than blood-soaked.

Martin sees his publisher standing by herself, juggling a glass of champagne while making last-minute corrections to her speech. He greets her warmly, appreciative of the fact she has flown from Melbourne.

'You only want me to speak for five minutes, right?' she says.

'Yeah, just an intro, then Nick and I will take over.'

'Excellent,' says the publisher. 'Drinks and dinner afterwards?'

'All booked,' says Martin.

It's still ten minutes to kick-off, but the hall is almost full.

'Told you so,' says Mandy, sidling up.

Martin had worried no one would come. 'No sport on telly,' he says. 'Cricket's washed out.'

'Excuse me! Excuse me!'

It's the booming voice of Sergeant Nathaniel Jones, the new policeman in town, still in uniform, standing in front of the bar, arms raised. The murmur fades but doesn't die completely.

'Shut the fuck up and listen!' shouts Jones and suddenly there's quiet, all eyes on him.

Martin watches the crowd, an old journalistic trait, focusing on the reaction rather than the person speaking. He sees Goffing is doing the same, one hand inside his jacket. Martin swivels: Ivan Lucic and Nell Buchanan are also scanning the audience. He has a bad feeling, hair on his neck rising, some latent nerve switching on. Fight or flight. All he wants to know is that Liam is nearby, that the boy is safe.

'I'm sorry,' booms Jones. 'We've had a bomb threat. Nothing to worry about, I'm sure, but I'm going to have to ask everyone to exit quickly and make your way across the road while we check it out.'

There's a collective groan from the throng.

The lawyer Nick Poulos yells above the muttering: 'Everyone to the pub. Back here in forty-five minutes.'

People shuffle out, conversation stepping up a notch. Something new to talk about; jokes about Martin being a trouble magnet. He's relieved to see Mandy has Liam and his friend in tow. 'I'm going to get them some food,' she says. 'I'll see you back here.'

'No problem.' Martin gives Liam a kiss as the seven-year-old squirms.

People wander towards the pub. Martin spies Jack Goffing across the road from the hall, talking with Ivan and Nell.

'Bit of excitement,' says Martin, joining them. 'Lucky you lot are here.'

'Glad to be of service,' says Nell, but there is something in her manner that unsettles him. She's tense, on guard.

‘What is it?’ Martin asks. ‘What do you know?’

Goffing gives him a weary look. ‘Just some chatter. Nothing to worry about.’

‘Jealous local,’ says Nell.

‘Kids,’ says Ivan.

Sergeant Jones and his constable come across the road. ‘All clear,’ he says. ‘No one left inside.’ He looks at his watch. Jack Goffing echoes the gesture.

Martin looks from one face to another, sees the apprehension. ‘Why aren’t you searching the premises?’ he asks.

Jones looks uncertain.

‘Protocol,’ says Goffing, filling the gap.

Martin is about to ask something else, he’s sure he is, when the night is rent by a massive orange flash. He’s facing the other way, his back to the hall, but he feels the heat on his neck, sees the glow reflected from walls and windows lining the opposite side of the street. The blast hits them, a shock wave. Debris begins to rain down and he crouches instinctively, arms above his head. The noise of glass smashing, of car alarms, of dogs barking, fragments of wood and glass clattering down onto the tin roofs of the shopping strip. Somewhere a woman screams.

A second explosion, and Martin looks towards the hall, what’s left of it, flames roaring and smoke pouring skywards. Next to him, he can see Ivan has a cut to his head, hit by wreckage, wiping it off, staring at the red glaze. Martin experiences a sort of flashback: somewhere foreign, the Middle East, the smell of burning, the orange glow of destruction, wonders what it is doing here, in Port Silver. In his home.

He turns to Goffing. The agent has his gun out, tensed.

‘What the hell?’ Martin manages, just as the first bullet ploughs into a road sign behind him.

‘Down,’ Ivan Lucic orders, cut forgotten, dragging Martin behind a parked car, pushing him to the pavement.

‘Up there, above the car park,’ says Nell, crouching beside them, firing off a shot. Actually firing a gun into the night. A small voice in Martin’s mind is protesting: not guns, not here.

‘I see them,’ says Ivan. Another bullet smacks into the side of the car and Ivan returns fire.

‘They’re on the move,’ says Nell. ‘Getting away.’

‘Good,’ says Goffing tersely. ‘Let them go. Not worth getting killed for. Give it three, then get Martin the fuck out of here.’

‘Mandy,’ Martin says. ‘Liam.’

‘We’ll look after them,’ says Ivan.

As he heads off in a crouching run, a Homicide detective on each side of him, Martin looks back at the hall, now reduced to nothing more than a flaming ruin, the night filled with sirens. He can’t make sense of it; it makes no sense. Bombs and bullets in his home town, the world turned awry. He runs, his mind trying desperately to catch up. How can this be? Is this his doing, has he brought this violence down upon his friends and family?