GUY MARTIN

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

PROLOGUE:

GAME OVER

I'D JUST LEFT the pits after the fuel stop. Head down, wrestling the 210-horsepower Honda Fireblade through the outskirts of Douglas, the Manx capital, and out onto another 38-mile lap of the island. One of my mechanics, Cammy, had told me I was in the lead, but only by a second. I could hear a difference in his voice. He's normally as calm as if he was reading a shopping list, but there was an edge this time. He knew we could win.

It was the start of the third lap of the 2010 Isle of Man Senior TT, the last race of the fortnight, the race I have been desperate to win since 2004, and the last chance to get a TT win for another year. I was pushing hard.

I had already missed out on a win by three seconds that week. Three seconds in a race held over 150 miles. A race that lasts one hour and 12 minutes, or 4,300 seconds. That means the winning margin was 0.07 per cent. It's obvious that every second counts in modern real road racing.

Down Bray Hill, with a full tank of fuel and a new rear tyre.

The bike goes from nearly bone dry to brim full, and the extra 24 litres of unleaded always makes a difference to the handling, but I know how to deal with it.

Then, three miles from the pits, comes Ballagarey. This is the kind of corner that keeps me racing on the roads. It's a proper man's corner. You go through the right-hander at 170 mph or more, leant right over, eyes fixed as far down the road as it's possible to see, which isn't very far. Like so many corners at the Isle of Man, and most of the other circuits I specialise at, it's blind. I can't see the exit of the corner when I fully commit to the entry.

I'd been through Ballagarey 100 times flat-out, but this time something happened. This time the front end tucked, lost grip and starting sliding. It's the beginning of a crash. That's not unusual. I'm saving slides regularly when I'm pushing for wins. Through the fastest corners the bike is always on the edge of crashing, just gripping enough to keep on going in the right direction. Go slightly too fast and the tyre shouts, 'Enough!' Go slightly too slow and you're no longer in the hunt for wins.

As the front tyre carried on skidding across the top of the road, I tried to save the slide. I thought, 'I've got it, I've got it, I've got it, I've got it …' I can sometimes get away with front-end tucks, when the bike is leant so far over that the front tyre eventually loses grip and begins to slide. You can save them on your knee, or give it a bit of throttle and it'll come back to you. One thing's for sure, you don't do anything major, like grabbing a handful of brake, and you don't panic because that's when you come off.

I went through all that thought process, as the bike was steadily skating, increasingly out of control towards the Manx stone wall that lines the outside of this corner. Then the thought 'Game over' entered my head. At those speeds, on a corner like

that, you're not jumping off the bike, just letting it go. I was leant over as far as a Honda CBR1000RR will lean, and a little bit more. I released my grip on the bars of the bike and slid down the road. I didn't think, 'This is going to hurt,' – just, 'Whatever will be, will be.'

CHAPTER 1

NO MIDDLE NAME

'The spaghetti measurer would be out and the chase would begin.'

I REGULARLY USED to say I was born and bred in Kirmington, because up until recently I always thought of the real town of my birth as a shithole. The truth is I actually arrived in the world in Grimsby, in 1981. I was born in the maternity hospital in Nunsthorpe, the roughest estate in the town. I was, and still am, Guy Martin – no middle name.

My dad missed my arrival. He was in the hospital for the birth of Sally, my older sister, but he had to stand outside because she was in breech and the father wasn't allowed in when things were getting complicated back in those days. When it was my turn to pop out, Dad was there with my mum waiting for me to appear, but at eight at night the midwife told them nothing

would happen until midnight, so Dad went out to get some bits from Scanlink, the local truck part specialist, for a job he was working and missed me being born at just gone ten. He was there for Stuart's birth and Kate's, though. My little sister's was so quick she wrecked the interior of his Ford Granada on the way to Grimsby Maternity Hospital.

My mum, Rita, is nine years younger than Dad. She was only 16 when they met. I think the age difference caused some friction between Dad and his mates of the time, but when I see old photos of them together, even with the nearly ten-year age gap, they don't look wrong together. They always look dead happy.

Ian Martin and Rita Kidals married six years later when my mum was 22, and their first child, Sally, was born a couple of years later. Sally was only four months old when I was conceived. Mum says it all happened at the end of her first night out after Sally's birth.

On 4 November 1981, the Martin family, now with a 13-month-old girl and a day-old baby boy, left hospital, jumped in the car and drove the 12 miles to my very first home, a flat above the old Co-Op in Caistor. It was a second-floor flat with a nice, big garden that had a sandpit in it. Our entrance was around the back of the shop, off Bank Lane.

I don't have strong memories of the place because we moved, when I was still only three, to the house on Gravel Pit Lane, Kirmington, where my parents still live. Now the house is surrounded by conifers, but in those days it had a barbed wire fence.

My dad was a part-time motorcycle racer, a privateer, which meant he paid for his own way, and won a bit of prize money here and there. Though he was racing for fun, never a career, he lined up with some of the biggest names of the time, competing in the Shell Oils series, the British Superbikes of its time. He raced at

15 Isle of Man TTs. He was a top privateer. He didn't start racing until he was in his mid-twenties.

The window frames of Gravel Pit Lane had begun to rot and to have them repaired Dad eventually had to sell his P&M-framed Suzuki 1000, the race bike he finished twelfth on in the 1983 Isle of Man TT. He was the first privateer home that year. The bike had all the right bits on it and he still raves about it now, but double-glazing was more important. They must have been on the bones of their arse.

We didn't get a telephone until one of my granddads went into hospital, when I was ten, which makes it 1991. Up until then the family would use the traditional red phone box over the road if they needed to make, or take, calls. I remember when my dad was away racing he'd have a timetable for ringing home to tell everyone he was all right. Mum would go out, cross the road and wait by the phone box for it to ring.

Dad would often work seven days a week. Especially when he was saving up for a bike. He would fix trucks six days a week, well, five and a half really, then on Sundays he would sometimes drive trucks for another company, and me and Sally would jump in the cab with him, sitting on the bunk-bed in the back. The money earned on Sunday would go towards his racing or bike projects.

Dad has worked for himself since 1995. When I was born he was employed by R K Hirst, the hauliers, in the same yard in Caistor he works from now. After he met my mum, but before they were married, he was in Nigeria, working as a fitter for a crew of road builders. At the same time Mum was in Germany working in a hotel. They had a break from the relationship for a bit, and it was when they were thousands of miles apart that they realised how much they missed each other and that's when they decided to get married. One time Sally and I were

in the garage and came across the love letters Dad sent from Nigeria. They both arranged to come back to England and were married three weeks later. That was over 35 years ago and they're still together now.

Even in his mid-sixties, and still not retired, Dad looks the same as he does in photos from when we were kids well over 20 years ago. I think this fact has gone a long way to shaping much of my view of work and life. Hard work never hurt him. The opposite, in fact. My dad has grafted on trucks for over four decades and he's as strong as a bull. He works in the pit, under Scania 4210s, with the 20-foot doors of the garage wide open whatever the weather and with nothing to protect him but his blue overalls, a few pints of stiff tea and cod liver oil. And he's fitter than a lot of men half his age.

If you met Ian Martin 30 years ago, you'd definitely recognise him now. He has always gone from having a full beard, to a goatee and then on to a porno-style handlebar 'tache. It's a three-yearly cycle, and I've never worked out what sets off the changes in the style of his facial hair. He has also worn spectacles as long as I've been alive, always the same size and style: big, rectangular ones, as thick as the bottom of a pint glass.

These specs were legendary in the Lincolnshire market town of Caistor. If Ian Martin's glasses came off there was going to be trouble, because my dad was a scrapper. I never have been, but he was a renowned fighter in Grimsby, Market Rasen and Caistor. If the glasses came off, stand back. I've heard the stories, but, I'm happy to say, I've never seen him in a fight. I think it was all part of a good night out for him: go out, get drunk, have a fight.

The famous Elton John song of 1973, 'Saturday Night's Alright (For Fighting)', was written about the rivalry between Caistor and Market Rasen, because Elton's co-writer, Bernie

Taupin, came from Normanby-by-Spital, 15 miles from Caistor. At the time there was a feud between lads of these towns just eight miles apart. It was the time of mods and rockers and anything went. One night the songwriter, then still unknown, was in the Aston Arms in Market Rasen when the Caistor mob came to town for a punch-up. Dad knows for a fact he was one of the Caistor lads causing bother that Taupin would write about.

It was good being Ian Martin's son, because it meant I rarely got in any bother. I've inherited a lot of Dad's traits, more than perhaps I'd like, but I've never been handy in a scrap. I've thrown the odd punch in self-defence, when I've had to, but I've never gone out looking for trouble. But those who did enjoy throwing fists around perhaps thought twice before picking on me. Another thing that helped me avoid the kind of trouble that kicks off every Friday and Saturday night in towns and cities all over Britain was that I've never been much of a boozer either, so I didn't go to pubs much. Still, I haven't escaped unscathed. I have no sense of smell after getting lamped on a night out in Lincoln when I was a teenager.

While he was lovey-dovey with my mum, buying her big Valentine's cards and all that, he wasn't a very cuddly dad when I was growing up. If everything was all right he'd give us a big thumbs up. He wouldn't say much and, as I've said, he seemed to be always working. Until I started working with him, part-time, we'd see him odd nights of the week, Saturday afternoon and some Sundays.

My mum, Rita, is a cracking lass, but awkward. Not socially awkward, more headstrong and stubborn. It must be where I get it from.

When I was young, I thought Rita Martin was the worst mum in the world, but I'm sure loads of people think that of their parents and only realise later how wrong they were!

Big Rita wouldn't take any nonsense, that's why I reckoned I was hard done by, but I look back now and think she did exactly the right thing. We learnt right from wrong. We weren't cheeky very often and we didn't have too much chelp. There definitely wasn't any naughty step in our house. She'd smack us to keep us in line if we weren't behaving. She would clip us with the spaghetti measurer, a flat piece of wood with rounded edges, basically a thin paddle about six inches long. It's the kitchen implement that has different-sized holes in it to help you judge how much spaghetti to put in the pan. She moved on to the spaghetti measurer, as a tool of child discipline, after realising wooden spoons weren't working. She was handy with it as well. It was thick enough not to snap, but not too thick, so it had a bit of whip to it.

The lead-up to a whack on the backside would follow a familiar pattern and develop like this: first we'd be cheeky or not pipe down after being told to, so Mum would put a hand on the cutlery drawer and look at us. That was the first warning. If we carried on, the next thing she'd do was close the kitchen window, so the neighbours couldn't hear us. Once the window was closed you knew you were getting it, and the spaghetti measurer would be out and the chase would begin. Until I learnt, my mum would spank my arse at least once a week, usually a quick whack while I was running away. It would come sharp, with a flick of the wrist.

Still, I got away lightly. My older sister Sally got it worse than me, and Stu got it worst of all. He was mischievous – a cheeky little bugger. He was suspended from school too, for mooning out of the bus window, throwing snowballs in class, breaking windows … Kate is the youngest and never got a spanking as far as I can remember. She nearly died, from whooping cough, when she was still very young. She turned blue, was

well on her way to going, according to my dad, and was rushed to Grimsby Hospital. She survived and, I reckon, played up to it too, even until she was 11 or 12, so she never got her spaghetti measured.

We'd often hear the threat, 'Wait till your dad gets home,' but he never did anything. Big Rita was the enforcer in Gravel Pit Lane. Of course, we weren't abused, I had a fantastic childhood. She was a great mum. She still is.

Rita had quite a tough upbringing herself. Once, when she was little, her school friends were all talking about Father Christmas. She raced home, all excited, to tell her mother, Double-Decker Lil, who then asked who had been filling her head with such rubbish! But Mum didn't pass that on to her own kids. Sally was 12 before she had any real doubts about the existence of Santa Claus, and Christmas time was mega at our house. On Christmas Eve my dad would have a few drinks and tell us to bring the pet rabbits into the house. It was the only day out of the whole year he'd do it, but it happened every year. He'd be as pissed as handcarts from the pub at lunchtime. It's the only time I remember seeing him drunk, but he'd be as daft as a brush, crawling around on the floor with our rabbits.

Rita laid down some weird rules. She wouldn't allow us to watch *Grange Hill* in case it led us down the wrong path. When we were playing out in the street with kids she regarded as a bad influence, Mum would shout, 'Your tea's ready,' even though we'd already had it. She wanted us to come in, but she wouldn't just say, 'Come in.' Perhaps she didn't want anyone thinking that she was looking down on anyone else in the village, even though that might have happened to us.

When Sally and I were very little, Mum had a trike, a pedal one, that she'd bought from a copper in Riby. She would pedal up

to the Humber Bridge, with me and Sally sat in a basket behind her looking backwards at the traffic coming to overtake us. It was a good 20-mile round trip, with us two in the back. We had an old rusty length of chain across our laps to keep us in, but that was it! Helmets? You're kidding, aren't you?

It almost goes without saying Rita was the no-nonsense type. Once I fell off the monkey bars in the local playground and hurt my arm. I told her I thought it was broken, but she inspected the injury and said there was nothing wrong with it. I showed my dad when he got home and he agreed with me. So did the hospital he took me to. It was broken. By weird coincidence, on the day I broke my arm two other pupils from the 18-strong Kirmington Church of England Primary School, where I was a pupil, also broke their arms. It was so unusual, 17 per cent of the whole school breaking their arms in one 12-hour period, the local paper sent out a photographer.

When I was young we'd go to Butlin's in Skegness for holidays, and then when I was 13 or 14 we all went to Tenerife – our first foreign holiday. Eventually, when Sally was 16 and getting to the age where she wasn't keen to go on the big family holiday any more, the six of us all went for one last big blow-out together, to Florida. It is remembered, by all of us, as the best holiday ever. By that time, Dad's business was well established and he was earning a decent living thanks to his hard graft.

Rita is from Hull, but her dad was Latvian. After his homeland had been invaded by the Nazis, in 1941, Voldemars Kidals was conscripted to fight for the Germans in the war. He was one of 200,000 Latvians that were given the choice: fight or be shot. Voldemars fitted Hitler's bill perfectly. He was blond and six-foot-two, but because he wasn't German, he and all his fellow countrymen were treated as cannon-fodder. It's reckoned that half those Latvian conscripts died on the battlefield. Voldemars

was sent straight to the Russian front, where he had to deal with the horrific winters that demolished Hitler's badly prepared and demoralised troops. Walter and his mate were manning a machine-gun post and realised that if, or when, the Russian army reached them they wouldn't be shown any mercy, so the pair of them deserted, escaping by clinging on to the bottom of a train for two days as it crossed Poland and into Germany. They were eventually captured by the Americans and put in a prisoner-of-war camp in Belgium. After that he was given the option of going to England or Canada, and he chose England. When the war ended a lot of Latvians were still housed at a camp near Leicester. After that Voldemars moved to another camp in Bransburton, just north of Hull. He learnt to speak a bit of English, but, even years later, when I was born, it was still only a bit. Everyone called him Walter.

Back in the years just after the war, Walter worked on the local farms and felt really well looked after. Lil lived in the same village, and they met at Hull Fair.

After they were married, the pair moved to Marmaduke Street in Hull. Then, in the late 1940s, they spotted a little place in a village called Nettleton advertised for sale in an estate agent's window. Walter cycled 18 miles from New Holland, after getting the ferry over from Hull, to look at the house. He and Lil moved to the village, near Caistor, and Walter ended up working in the Nettleton iron-mines. The iron ore mined there was some of the finest in the world, I've been told, and it was taken straight to the steelworks in Scunthorpe on a purpose-built railway line. Walter worked there for years, below ground, as a face-worker at a time when mules were pulling the rock to the surface. Later in his life he became a builder.

He was, like my mum and dad, a proper grafter. And Walter could make anything. He would re-sole shoes and make his own

sweeping brushes. He had a map of Latvia made from iron, that he cast in sections to show the different regions. About the size and height of a large coffee table, it was a decorative feature of his back garden. He came from a time and place where people didn't automatically go to the shop and buy what they needed. Not if they could make it. When she was living at home, one of my mum's jobs was to rip up the newspaper and thread the pieces on to a string to use instead of toilet roll. That was a night's entertainment.

It was a long time before the Kidals bought a TV, but my dad's family were the first in the town of Caistor to have a television set, and proud that the mayor's son had to come to their house to watch it.

As kids we would love visiting Granddad and Granny Kidals because Walter had a smallholding with his own animals: mainly sheep, I remember one called Nancy, and rabbits, nothing too big. Walter wouldn't say much, but he'd show us things. Every now and then, when my mum was a little girl, a rabbit that she had become attached to would go missing. As they sat around the table that night little Rita would remember to ask, 'Where's my rabbit?' her mum, Lil, would reply, 'You're eating it.'

Walter had a load of sayings, but the most memorable for me was this, delivered in a broad Latvian accent: 'When you dead, you dead.' Perhaps it was memories of what he saw in the war that made him say stuff like that to his young grandkids. It was clear he didn't believe in heaven or hell. And thinking about it now, that attitude probably rubbed off on me.

Mum is one of five Kidals children, Rita and four brothers, and a lot of this make-do attitude of Voldemars and Lil obviously passed down to my mum. We had a cooked dinner every night, with a pudding to follow, but some of the meals were best

described as concoctions. Very little went to waste. We'd have bubble and squeak on a Monday night, made from the left-over vegetables from Sunday dinner. I'd eat anything, but Sally was always more picky and dreaded Monday nights. I know most of my friends and schoolmates would turn their noses up at some of our meals: mashed swede and beans in gravy and stuff like that; anything really, because that's how my mum was brought up, just to get by. There was nothing wrong with it and it didn't do her any harm, or my mum's mum, Double-Decker Lil. She is 90 and going strong.

Why Double-Decker? It seems she was a big lass when she was younger. She had a stroke when Rita was 18, and Rita looked after her bed-bound mother. You wouldn't know now that she'd had a stroke, though. Lil has outlasted all my other grandparents. She's double hard. Around the time of the 2013 North West 200 race meeting, in the middle of May, my mum told me Lil was in hospital with cancer. When I got back from racing in Northern Ireland I spent quite a bit of time with Lil before I went away again to race at the TT. I wasn't sure what the future was going to bring for her, and being so busy at the time I hadn't been visiting her enough.

Lil had visited the doctors, and knew something was up, because she had some trouble with her plumbing or something. She was taken into hospital, where they told her she was pretty much riddled with cancer. She was 89 and still had all her marbles. When I visited her in hospital, she was telling me that she knew the doctors had got the diagnosis wrong because she felt fine. At the time, I didn't know if she was trying to convince me or herself, but she sounded pretty sure and she looked much the same as usual. Then, a few days later, a doctor came to see her and said, 'Sorry, Lil, we made a mistake.' It wasn't cancer, it was something else. So they let her out. She was right all along.

She knew there was nothing up. You don't mess with Double-Decker Lil.

The Second World War has had other influences on me. My dad was a baby boomer, born after all the surviving soldiers returned home and got back on the nest. And I was named after Guy Gibson, the Wing Commander of 617 Squadron, the Dambusters, who were based in Lincolnshire, not far down the road from Kirmington at RAF Scampton. When I was first told that, I didn't think much of it, but now I realise he's quite a man to be named after. It was my dad's decision, not Mum's. My dad has a lot of interest in the history of World War II. His dad was a Royal Marine; while Dad's father-in-law, Voldemars, was reluctantly fighting against the Allies. The only thing that was ever mentioned about this, was one time when both sets of grandparents were invited to Kirmington and, after a few drinks, Walter, in his broken English, said to my other granddad, Jack, 'Me and you on opposite sides.' When he said that, everyone burst out laughing.

Dad talked about the war so often – the Battle of Britain, Dunkirk etc. – that when I was little I once asked Mum, 'When is the war going to end?' Rita wrote it on a postcard and sent it to a 'Kids Say the Funniest Things' type competition in one of the weekly gossip magazines she read – and won!

My dad's father Jack was involved in the Normandy landings, one of the waves of servicemen who arrived on the beaches a day or so after D-Day. He drove a six-wheel GMC truck off the landing craft. On the trailer he was towing was the most advanced radar in the world at the time, one of only two in existence, my dad would tell us.

After VE Day, Jack came back to England and married May, my grandmother, but was then sent to South Africa to prepare for the invasion of Japan. The sea and ground attack on Japan never

happened, though, because the two atomic bombs were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, ending the war once and for all.

Jack grew up in South Kelsey, less than a mile from where I bought my first house. The Martins never fall very far from the tree.

After leaving the Marines, Jack was the transport manager at T H Brown's, a haulage firm a stone's throw from the Moody International truck yard I now work at. They became the first Scania truck dealer in the country, and it was where my dad first started his training – working for his dad, like I later would. So Granddad Jack was in road transport, my dad is in road transport, and so am I. In fact, Jack's dad, my great-grandfather, was the road foreman for Lincolnshire County Council. He was involved in the building of the Caistor bypass. He had his then 14-year-old son Jack involved too, changing the points on the railway line that transported the rock to Nettleton to build the 20-per-cent incline to Caistor Top. Well, he had Jack involved until the boy forgot to change the points one time and the train, full of rock, crashed through the engine shed.

Four generations. It's in the breeding. My Granddad Martin was very much like my dad, because I remember he was all work, work, work, trucks, trucks, trucks. He was another stubborn one. He and my dad were close to scrapping no end of times, I'm told.

Grandma May Martin was always Nanny, while Lil was Granny. Nanny smoked like a damp bonfire. It was Nanny who first got me into tea. She would make it strong and always in a cup and saucer. I also remember her lifting the back of her skirt up to warm her bum by the fire.

Nanny was the first of my grandparents to die, but by then I was in my late teens. I was lucky to have had both sets of grandparents all through my growing up.

All my family lived close by when I was a child. Walter and Lil were in Nettleton, Jack and May in Caistor, us in Kirmington. With holidays in Skegness, it was rare for us ever to leave Lincolnshire, the county I've lived in all my life.