

CODE BRAVO

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MathThrills.com

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Prologue

0 minutes left

Will heaved himself up another rung of the rattling metal ladder, his heart drumming in his ears.

Every muscle in his body screamed. His foot slipped, and he banged heavily into the metal framing. He cried out, as pain radiated sharp and jagged from the knife wound in his side.

He had to get higher. There was no time.

Clenching his teeth, he forced one foot up, then the other. Grab, pull, repeat.

Then his hand hit air. A platform.

Was he high enough? How high did he have to be?

It didn't matter. It was too late now. He had seconds, if that.

He tugged at the suit balled under his arm. It flapped open, the wind catching at the arms and legs and cracking the thin synthetic fabric like a whip. His hands were shaking, but he gritted his teeth and shoved one leg and then the other in. Gingerly, wincing against the burning in his side, he encased his arms in the rustling fabric.

He stepped to the edge of the platform.

In the blue-black dark he could just make out the mountainside dropping away far, far below. Nothing but space and turbulent air between him and jagged rocks and scrub.

And in the distance: the twinkling lights of Brisbane city. Where Eliza was.

He swallowed, his eyes suddenly prickling. He swiped a hand, steeling himself.

He'd done all he could. It was no longer up to him if the city survived.

He glanced down at his watch. The luminescent display read

7:00 PM.

Everything seemed to still, like the world was holding its breath.

Then a column of light shot into the air. Pain shot through Will's skull: too bright.

Too *close*.

He felt the beginning swell of heat, a deep pulsing of subsonic sound that rumbled in the chambers of his body rather than being truly heard.

The ground swam below him. He had no choice. Forwards was the only direction left for him.

His heart shuddered, a staccato thrumming in his ears. He raised his arms, poised on the edge of the platform as if tied to a cross.

And he jumped.

The wind whipped at his hair and whistled past his ears, and then began to roar. He was falling, the tower at his belly, headfirst towards the ground.

And he was gaining speed.

Too much speed, too fast.

The top of the mountain pulsed. Birds and bats rose screaming into the air.

Suddenly, the wind caught in the taut fabric stretched between his arms and legs, and the wound in his side screamed as the wingsuit finally, *finally*, started to work.

A deep, ear-splitting rumbling replaced the growl of the wind. Below him, the scrub collapsed downwards as the ground crumpled, the very earth disintegrating from beneath roots and trunks and tangled branches.

And then he was clear of the imploding mountaintop, and he was accelerating, arms and legs taut with the effort of remaining steady. His breath rushed in and out, in tiny, amazed gasps. He

was still alive.

He was *still alive!*

He risked a look down, at the dim outline of the trees and rocks he was skimming over.

His stomach flipped, a sick punch in his gut.

And he realised that he didn't have a parachute.

Chapter 1.

73 hours and 43 minutes left

Will's eyes narrowed as he looked across the shopping centre at the banners plastered over the jewellery store windows.

Late Night Shopping Super Sale. Take 50% off the marked price, and then take a further 45% off that.

"Bingo," he said, a grin spreading over his face. He nodded towards the huge, gaudy banner still being hung by a shop assistant. "I told you."

"It's not going to work," Eliza said, not looking up from her phone, her slim fingers flicking over the virtual keyboard. Light from the screen flashed on her black-rimmed, rectangular glasses. "No one's dumb enough to fall for it."

"Not even Carl?" Will said.

That made her look up. He followed her gaze and saw her pause, motionless, as a hulking boy the same age as them stood up from behind a counter.

"Shouldn't he be out looking for smart people to antagonise?" she said, raising an eyebrow.

"His dad owns the store," Will said, and if it were possible, his smile grew even wider.

"Okay," Eliza said, and she blanked the phone screen. "I'm listening."

Will turned, his back to the store, and lowered his voice. He ran his hand through his hair, brushing it from his eyes. "Okay. So your job is distraction. See the other assistant?"

He saw Eliza's gaze shift, past his shoulder, beyond him to the shop, and she nodded.

"Keep her away from Carl. Make up something believable."

Eliza still said nothing, her eyes turning back on him, impassive. She fiddled with the end of her plait, her dark wavy hair bound, in some kind of complicated pattern that made no sense to him, over her left shoulder.

He swallowed. "This is the best I can come up with since the online money dried up," he said. He cleared his throat. It sounded like he was whining, but he needed her on board. "And it's a one-time deal. Tonight only!"

"Okay," she said, and he relaxed, letting out a breath he didn't know he was holding. "I'm in."

He grinned again. "I knew you respected great ideas."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, so, I'll be buying a watch for my boyfriend?"

"You did hear me say believable?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

She shoved him. Though she was tiny, and way shorter, she'd always been able to hold her own against him.

"Ow," he said, with a pained gasp of a laugh. He staggered backwards. It was only half for effect.

"Men find me desirable," she said, raising an eyebrow again, and emphasising the word *men*.

"Lucky them," he said.

"Cash," she said, holding out her hand. "If you want it to be believable, I need to actually buy something."

"Okay, okay." He yanked his wallet from the pocket of his jeans and rifled through a wad of crisp notes before handing a couple to her.

As she tucked them into her purse, he dug in his other pocket and pulled out a large black button attached to a small plastic box with a thin cable.

"Is that a hidden camera?" Eliza asked, her voice turning dubious again.

Will nodded. "Just some insurance." He replaced the middle

button of his shirt with the camera and awkwardly tried to feed the cable down into his pocket again.

“Here,” Eliza said, rolling her eyes. “Some secret agent you’d make.” She tugged the box from his fingers and with quick, deft movements, arranged it under his shirt against his skin.

“Don’t tickle!” Will protested, as her fingers brushed against his ribs.

“I’m not tickling you,” she snapped. “Hold still and don’t be a baby.”

She pulled her hands away and he raised an eyebrow quizzically at her, patting his shirt down.

She shook her head. “Can’t see it.”

“Let’s do this,” Will said, a grin spreading again.

Eliza’s cheek tugged up, the little resigned half-smile that he knew she couldn’t help, and her dark brown eyes glimmered. It just made him grin broader. She still played it cool, but he knew she got the same thrill out of this that he did.

Will watched as she entered the store, and waited until the other assistant approached her. Eliza led the other girl towards the front window, so that the assistant’s back was to Carl, and over her shoulder, met Will’s eye with the barest of nods.

Hand in pocket, Will wandered in, his finger silently flicking the switch on the camera box.

Carl’s back was to him as he approached the counter. He turned around when Will cleared his throat.

“Hey, Carl,” Will said, smiling, meeting Carl’s gaze.

Carl hulked over him. Will wasn’t that much shorter, but Carl’s bulk made him seem like he filled the room. They’d scuffled once after a rugby match got heated. Both had ended up with a black eye.

There were a few seconds of silence as Carl glowered. Will waited, his smile growing wider, seeing the cogs slowly clicking

over behind Carl's eyes as he realised that Will was a customer and he'd have to serve him.

"What do you want?" Carl said, his face twisted in a scowl.

"My older brother sent me to pick something up for him." Will said, as if Carl's tone was polite rather than borderline threatening.

He pulled out his wallet and plucked out the thick wad of fifties and hundreds, and tapped it casually on the benchtop, while peering into the cabinet of rings between them.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Carl straighten, the scowl softening. He even tried a smile, a parodic impersonation of a pleasant salesman.

Will had to clench his teeth to hold back the burst of laughter. This was perfect. Going exactly to plan.

"He needs a ring to propose to his missus, but he's off working in the mines," Will said, wandering down the length of the glass cabinet, still tapping the wad of cash. His story wouldn't stand up to any scrutiny – apart from anything else, he didn't have a brother – but Carl didn't know that, and he had several hundred distractions being waved around in front of his face.

"Right, right," said Carl, trying not to look at the money. And failing.

Will spotted a ring, and his stomach flipped. Perfect. That was the one.

"Let me have a look at that," he said, tapping his finger on the glass above the prize. "The big one. Two carat diamond."

Carl glanced at him quickly, then at the money, then at the case. "Yeah. Okay," he said, and with fat fingers better suited to a rugby ball than the tiny key he was using, eventually managed to get the case open.

He grabbed it, the massive diamond set in sparkling gold dwarfed by his hands. He went to hand it to Will, and as he did, the price tag swung around, and they both saw it at once. It read

\$35,990.

Carl paused, hand in the air between them. Will saw those sluggish cogs churning again, trying to work out if Will was playing him.

More distraction needed.

Quickly, he yanked his wallet out and extracted a second, even thicker wad of money, and Carl visibly relaxed.

“Don’t drop it,” Carl said, his voice caught in some weird battle between being professional and showing Will how little he thought of him. Kind of made him sound like a frog, more than anything else. Will nodded, placed the cash on the bench and tweaked the ring from Carl’s fingers. He twisted the ring in the light, not really looking. From the corner of his eye, he could see Carl’s eyes glued to the money. On the other side of the shop, the other assistant was locked in animated conversation with Eliza, a variety of metal-banded watches looped around both girls’ wrists.

“Perfect,” Will said, and he met Carl’s eyes again, setting the ring down. “I’ll take it. Paying cash, obviously.”

He scooped up his bundle of notes. “I guess you’ll have to clear that with your boss over there,” he said, nodding at the other assistant.

Carl’s eyes narrowed. “She’s not my boss,” he snapped. “I’m going to be running this store in a couple of years. I don’t need her permission.”

Slamming the cabinet door shut, Carl locked it and stood up. He poked the ring into the box and slid it into a small paper bag, stalking back to the register.

Will followed. His heartrate was starting to pick up. This was it.

“Don’t forget the discount,” he said, nodding at the banner at the front of the store.

“Of course,” Carl said, his voice taking on a sneering quality now, like Will was telling him something extremely obvious.

Carl looked down at the register and ran his finger along the buttons. Will followed his gaze, scanning the labels printed on them.

Half-price.

Members' Discount.

5% off.

10% off.

The discount buttons ran in five percent increments all the way to ninety-five percent off.

Will waited. He forced himself to breathe, to keep the same calm smile on his face.

He saw Carl glance towards Eliza's assistant, a shadow of doubt flitting across his features.

Bingo again.

"If you don't know what to do, I'll go ask her," Will said, shifting towards Eliza and the other girl.

"It's fine," Carl snapped, his scowl returning.

"Just trying to help," Will said, holding his hands up.

Carl shot him a glowering look, then reached across the counter and snatched a brochure, opening it to the page showing the discount. He pecked out the digits *35990* into the register, and hit the *50% off* button.

Will watched, heart thumping, as Carl ran a finger along the "*take a further 45% off that*" part of the text. His brow furrowed, and then he poked the *45% off* button savagely.

Nothing happened.

Will felt light with relief. Carl obviously didn't know it, but it looked like Will's research had been right. The point of sale system could only apply a single discount. Carl had to enter the discount in one go.

And he had no idea how to calculate it.

"Look, I'm going to miss my movie. Can't you just get her to

do this?” Will said, letting a bored annoyance flow into his voice. He glanced at his watch and once again made to move over to the other side of the store, but Carl growled out something that sounded like “wait”.

“Okay, okay, settle down.”

Carl’s jaw clenched spasmodically as his eyes flicked between the register and the assistant who was now moving to the other register with Eliza.

“Look,” said Will, his tone carefully disinterested. “It’s just ninety-five percent off isn’t it? I mean, fifty plus forty-five is ninety-five, right?”

Carl paused, then entered $50 + 45$ into the register. The screen flashed *95* back at him.

“Looks right,” Will said.

Carl repeated the calculation, with the same result. He glanced at Will, his eyes scanning, those cogs grinding, but Will kept his face expressionless.

Turning back to the register, Carl sighed loudly and entered *35990* in again. And then he pressed the *95% off* button.

1799.5 appeared on the screen. And Will whooped with triumph in his head.

“Eighteen hundred dollars,” Carl said.

Will flipped out the wad of notes and with fast flicks of his fingers, counted out the price onto the counter, before Carl could think too much about the amount.

Then he had to watch Carl slowly recount them.

Twenty agonizing seconds later, Carl dumped the notes into the drawer and hit the *Sale complete* button.

The register started noisily printing the receipt. From the corner of his eye, Will glimpsed Eliza leaving the shop, a small bag swinging between her fingers.

“Here,” Carl said, shoving the receipt into the tiny bag sitting

between them.

As he did it, the door to the store's back room squeaked open, and a heavyset older man in a suit emerged.

As Carl turned to see who it was, Will swiped the bag off the countertop, and walked briskly from the shop, his breath catching in his throat.

Eliza was waiting outside, just out of sight, and she raised an eyebrow, questioning.

“Done,” Will said, and a grin split over Eliza's face.

They half-jogged from the gallery of shops towards the food court packed with people out for late night shopping. Only then did they stop behind a large pot plant and look back.

“Any second now,” Will said.

Back in the store, the man in the suit was talking to Carl. He wrapped an arm around Carl's shoulder, as Carl brandished a receipt. The man took it and examined it for a few seconds.

Then his arm slipped off Carl's shoulder.

He stepped back and smacked the receipt with the back of his hand. Carl moved to a register, typed in some numbers then gestured for the man to look. Shaking his head, the man typed in his own set of numbers.

Even from a distance, Will and Eliza could hear the rising voices in the store.

“Looks like dad's not happy,” Eliza said.

“That's what happens when you blow \$8100,” Will said. He felt breathless, adrenaline coursing through his bloodstream.

Moments later, a panicked-looking Carl burst out into the shopping mall amidst crowds of shoppers. He ran a few metres up the mall, then in the opposite direction, craning his neck to scan the crowds.

Eliza grabbed the back of Will's shirt, tugging him further behind the pot plant, and he had to stifle a burst of giggles.

“It’s not funny,” Eliza said, but she was starting to laugh, low and quiet, too.

After a few long moments, Carl turned back and re-entered the store, his every movement dragging with reluctance.

“Also not happy,” Will said, getting his laughter under control.

“I kind of want to hear his dad yell at him,” Eliza said, grinning. “Does that make me a bad person?”

Leaving the pot plant behind, they drifted through the food court.

“I reckon I can pawn it for eight grand, no problem,” Will said, jamming the tiny bag containing his prize into his jean pocket. “That leaves us more than six grand up.”

“He’s going to kill you at school tomorrow,” Eliza said.

“Me? What about you?”

“Unlike you, I have years of good girl credit built up,” Eliza said. “No one could possibly suspect me of being involved.”

“Hmm,” Will said. She was right. They were all in Year 11, Carl included. But although Will and Eliza had ended up in all the same classes – Math B, Math C, Information Processing and Technology, Physics, Chemistry and of course, English – Eliza was the top of all their classes, while Will only did the very minimum he needed to do to pass. And sometimes not even that. Years of that kind of behaviour was why he’d been surprised that she was, actually, still kind of cool, underneath all the excellence awards.

“Well, that’s why I have this, isn’t it?” He tugged the camera from his shirt. “Apart from being an upstanding young citizen, what other shining personal qualities does Carl have?”

“An ego the size of Western Australia?”

“So which do you think Carl would rather – put up with some grief from his Dad, or become a worldwide sensation on YouTube for being a dumbass?”

Eliza smiled, slow and broad, her white teeth gleaming. “We’re going to go to hell, aren’t we?”

Chapter 2.

73 hours and 2 minutes left

The expanse of concrete that was the Port of Brisbane was covered by shipping containers and a huge warehouse that opened towards the water. Cranes towered over the ships lining the wharf and rows of container trucks.

In a back corner of the warehouse, Senior Sergeant Drake Wessley shoved his shotgun around the end of a shipping container and fired.

His jaw clenched as hundreds of rounds ricocheted off the container walls. Rusty metal fragments rained down on his head.

“Sir. Sir!”

Drake glanced at the sergeant sheltering behind the other end of the container. He was all that remained of the nine-man team Drake had accompanied to the port inspection.

Drake dredged up the man’s name from his memory – Smith. Terrance Smith. His brain seemed at once to be on overdrive, taking in everything around him, while simultaneously blocking out everything earlier than ten damn minutes ago, when this disaster of a situation had begun.

“Handgun mags?” Smith said, panting.

Drake withdrew a mag from a pouch on his belt and tossed it to Smith.

“Last one – make it count.” He realised he was shouting to overcome the ringing in his ears. “They’re wearing vests – I hit one with three rounds in the chest and he didn’t drop. Go for the head.”

Smith nodded, reloaded, and fired two rounds.

Immediately, return fire hammered Smith’s end of the

container.

Drake risked a look around his corner. Crates set alight by gunfire filled the warehouse with smoke. At the warehouse entrance, Drake could see the refugee boat they'd been sent to inspect sitting in its dry dock.

Two gunmen stood by the boat talking to someone out of view, their weapons stiff in their hands.

Drake swallowed, and leaned out further. There was a third man on the boat deck. He passed a metal crate down to the two others, and they loaded it into the back of a white van.

Drake flinched as a reflection high up in the crane blinded him. A fraction of a second later a bullet snapped over his head and smashed into the concrete floor behind him.

He jerked back into cover.

"Sniper on the crane," Drake said, and Smith nodded, his face white. "Whatever they're loading: it can't be good. We have to stop them leaving."

"How?" Smith said. "I've got less bullets left than bad guys, and they've got bloody assault rifles."

Sneaking another peak around the corner, Drake saw the man on the boat deck jump down and jog to a black ute in front of the van.

His mind flicked over the possibilities. Hold tight and wait for help: bad guys get away. Charge the van and truck: sniper nails them before they get close.

"We've got another problem," said Smith, pointing at a line of tanks inside the entrance to the warehouse. Each tank had a red *HIGHLY FLAMMABLE FUEL* warning painted on the side.

Another gunman was crouched by the tank, unscrewing a massive valve with both hands. He lurched backwards as a torrent of brown liquid spewed forth, then leapt into the back of the ute, which screeched into motion.

The fuel flowed steadily into the warehouse.

Towards the burning crates.

Drake's nostrils flared as dizzying fuel fumes wafted over them. He glanced at his shotgun, and swore. "You reckon you've got any chance of hitting that sniper?"

"Sure. This baby's accurate to half a klick," Smith said, patting the barrel of his handgun, but the look on his face didn't match the forced confidence in his voice. "Maybe the sniper's cleared out too?"

Holding his shotgun by the barrel, Drake stuck the butt out the side of the shipping container.

It exploded into kindling.

"Nope," Drake said, brushing splinters from his shirt and dropping the remnants of the weapon. "Did anyone in our squad bring long arms? Like a sharpshooter, for example?"

"Not exactly. Benson had an M4, but... they got him," Smith said.

The team had made a fighting retreat into the back of the warehouse, using crates and shipping containers as cover. Drake could see the carbine lying beside Benson's body about ten metres back. It was a short run under normal circumstances but a death sentence under sniper fire.

"I can cover you," Smith said, following Drake's gaze.

"Right," Drake said, and swallowed. "When I break cover, you open up. Keep his head down long enough for me to grab it and get back."

Smith nodded, face drawn.

Drake took a few deep breaths then burst forwards.

Sound exploded behind him as Smith started to fire steadily. Drake skidded, scooped at the rifle with his left hand and pushed off the ground with his right.

A bullet hissed past.

Drake forced his legs to accelerate, and dived the last metres back into cover. He shoved himself off his stomach and panted, his back against the container.

“No holes, sergeant.” He patted himself down and grinned. His heart raced, thudding in his ears.

“How do you feel about crispiness?” Smith said grimly, pointing. The fuel was lapping at the first of the burning crates.

Drake pulled the magazine from the carbine, and his grin vanished. Empty. “Better get ready to run.”

“Might be one in the chamber?”

Drake checked. Desperate hope mingled with dismay. “One shot,” he said.

He glanced over the rifle. The scope was intact. But he needed a range to dial it in. “You haven’t got a laser rangefinder, have you?”

“Sure,” Smith said. “Would you like the basic or the deluxe version?” He kicked at the shell casings by his feet. “All the tactical gear’s back at base.”

Drake sighed. It seemed like a lifetime, but until ten minutes ago, this had been a standard intelligence operation. Inspect the refugee boat. Take some photos. Report back. The biggest opposition such operations normally faced were inept government officials. And rats.

“Could be three hundred, could be five – hard to tell,” said Smith, glancing out from behind the container. He was exposed for less than a second, but almost instantly, a bullet punched into the concrete where his head had been.

“Something tells me *he* knows what the range is,” Drake said, his teeth gritted. His brain churned, dredging up training years old. He could estimate the range using a familiar object near the sniper. But as he ran the M4 scope over the crane, all he could see was metal scaffolding and ropes, and, just barely in the fading light, a

black-clad bump that was probably the sniper's head.

Nothing obvious he could use. He put the rifle down and rubbed his eyes. The smell of fuel was making his head throb.

A bullet hit a floor grate and sent sparks flying into the fuel. Drake winced, expecting the burst of flame that would fry them like sausages, but miraculously, it didn't ignite.

"Whatever you're planning, sir, we have to do it now," Smith said, his voice tense.

Drake clutched his face, trying to ignore his growing headache. A bullet clanged off a nearby metal pole and restarted the ringing in his ears. A moment later he heard the much fainter crack of the shot.

He dropped his hands sharply. "That's it," he said. "Smith – how many rounds you got left?"

Smith checked. "Two."

Drake nodded once. "Right. When I say, stick your head up and fire one round."

Drake pressed a button on his watch twice. The display showed *0:00:00*.

"Okay... GO!"

Smith stood, sighted briefly, shot off a round and then ducked. Drake waited for the flash from the sniper rifle and then pressed the button. A fraction of a second later the shipping container clanged loudly. Then, after what seemed an age, Drake heard the faint snap of the sniper's shot. He pressed the button again. The display read *0:01:17*.

"One more," Drake said, and Smith nodded.

This time the responding sniper bullet passed overhead and smashed into the back wall of the warehouse. Now the display showed *0:01:24*.

"Double check this math for me," said Drake, stabbing buttons on his watch. "Sum of 117..." Another button press. "And 124?"

“241,” Smith said immediately.

“Okay, about 1.2 seconds for the sound of his shot to get to us. Sound travels at about 340 metres per second, so...”

Drake scrunched his eyes shut and muttered to himself.

“It’s 408 metres, sir,” said Smith, after barely a second.

Drake raised his eyebrows.

Smith shrugged. “I spend a lot of time at the racetrack.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” said Drake. Twisting the scope, he dialled in the range. A second twist adjusted for the angle of the shot.

He looked at Smith and swallowed hard. This was it. Their only chance. “I’m going to need four or five seconds to get lined up on this guy, so you’re going to have to keep him distracted.”

Smith nodded, his face pale.

“Try...” Drake hesitated. What he was asking Smith to do was dangerous. Very dangerous. But they had no other choice. “Try making a run for that pile of crates.”

Smith crouched, readying himself in a sprint position. “Ready,” he said.

“Be careful,” Drake said, and Smith nodded, eyes on his finish line. “On three.”

“One,” Drake said, his voice dropping low. Smith tensed, his muscles visibly bunching beneath his uniform. “Two... THREE!”

Smith exploded forwards, zigzagging erratically.

Drake rolled sideways into a crouch, bringing the M4 up and dropping his eye to the scope. The cross-hair raced up the crane as Drake counted off the stairway platforms. When he hit the third platform, he arrested the upwards movement of the rifle and nestled the butt deeper into his shoulder.

The sniper fired again, the flash lighting up his hiding spot.

There was a muffled cry, and Drake gritted his teeth. He held steady, focussing on shifting the crosshair until it lay centred on

the sniper's head.

He breathed out, his eyes unblinking.

And squeezed the trigger.

He kept his eye at the scope, imagining the bullet flying through the air.

There was a beat of stillness.

Then, silently, the sniper's head snapped backwards out of sight.

Drake's heart yammered. Had he made the hit? Or was the sniper taking cover?

Then, finally, he saw it. The sniper's head, slowly lolling forwards to hang limply off the edge of the platform.

Relief washed through Drake.

"Smith," he called, but there was no answer. Heat spiked through him, and he dropped the rifle, scrambling for the crates.

"Smith!" he called louder, and skidded around the corner of the crates. His voice sounded too loud in the silence now empty of gunfire.

Smith was lying with his back against a crate, blood spreading out from where his hands were clutching his thigh.

"You got him?" Smith said, his voice low and tight with pain.

"Got him. Let's get the hell out of here." Drake crouched down beside the sergeant. "Can you walk?"

"Just a flesh wound," Smith said, but as he tried to get up, he crumpled around the injury, his face white.

"Come on," Drake said, and wedged his arm under Smith's shoulder, hauling him to his feet.

Together they staggered around the burning crates and bodies, towards the warehouse entrance. A rush of fresh air hit Drake in the face and he gasped it in, his head spinning after the petrol fumes.

Then there was a *WHOOMPF* behind them.

Drake glanced back. The fuel had reached the first burning crate. And a wall of flames was roaring towards the tanks.

“Damn it,” Drake grunted, and he jerked Smith into a limping, shambling run. “Move, move, move!”

They cleared the entrance. The flames were licking at the first tank as they stumbled past. Drake glimpsed the top of a ladder on the dock edge. There. That might save them.

He forced every remaining ounce of energy he had into his muscles, almost lifting Smith off the ground. Seconds – that was all they had.

They were almost at the ladder when Drake glanced back again. The tanks were practically wrapped in flame now.

Drake yelled, tightening his hold on Smith, and charged over the edge of the dock.

Legs still windmilling, they plummeted towards dark water.

There was an immense *crump*, and intense heat seared Drake’s back. A sheet of fire shot out over their heads, licking tongues reaching down for them.

But then the water was there, and with a shock that tore Smith from his grip, Drake plunged into ice-cold blackness.

He was suspended in the depths, his punished lungs screaming for air. He twisted, trying to find which way was up. A vision of surfacing into a raging inferno flickered over his mind, but when he finally breached the surface, the flames had dissipated.

He sucked in fresh air, his vision swimming. An orange glow was raging above the dock, far above him. Where was Smith? He spun on the spot, relief filling him when he saw the dark shape of the sergeant’s head bob above the waves.

For a few glorious moments, the dead police and the aching pains in his bruised and battered body were all forgotten. They were alive. Alive! His brain seemed to be frozen between exaltation and some kind of shock. How had his normal day at

work turned into this – this action-hero, gun-toting, exploding-buildings madness?

He swam for Smith, grabbing him before the man could disappear again beneath the surface.

“You think it was drugs?” Smith said, a grimace visibly twisting his face even in the shadowy twilight.

“Not sure,” said Drake. He rolled onto his back, wrapped his arm around the sergeant’s chest and kicked out with his legs, heading for the ladder. The joy of just being alive was quickly wearing off, and his brain was kicking back into gear. Into reality. “Whatever it was, there was a lot of it – that van’s tyres were rubbing against the frame.”

“And those guys were equipped,” Smith muttered. “Assault rifles, tactical gear.”

“Yeah. Not exactly your typical drug dealers.”

The sergeant lapsed into silence, his eyes clenched shut. Drake swam on, his brow furrowed, his eyes staring intently into the evening sky. He had never known an Australian drug crew to shoot it out with police. Yet these gunmen had just killed seven federal police to protect whatever had been in those crates.

And now they, and their cargo, were loose in the city.

Chapter 3.

68 hours and 59 minutes left

“Did you tell Jeff you’re staying here?” Eliza asked, stashing the diamond ring behind a book on her bookshelf.

Will plopped into the half-retro, half-just-old single armchair in the corner of Eliza’s room. He raised one eyebrow. “Really?”

Eliza scooted back on her bed, crossing her legs and leaning against the wall. She raised her hands, palm-out. “Just checking.”

“As long as I show up at school and don’t drink, do drugs or murder people, he doesn’t care,” Will said shortly, tugging a magazine from the jumbled stack beside the chair and flicking it open to a random page. He knew that Abby, Eliza’s mum, probably had texted his uncle Jeff telling him that Will was staying anyway.

“Toss me the camera and I’ll download the footage,” Eliza said, pulling her laptop onto her knees and flipping it open.

Will grinned, dropping the magazine back onto the pile, and threw himself onto the bed beside Eliza, slumping back on his elbows beside her.

There were a few moments of silence while her fingers whizzed over the track pad. Then the video was playing on mute in an editing program, the shot focussed clear on Carl’s face as he struggled with the register.

Will laughed, low and devious.

“Why don’t you use these skills in school?” Eliza said, also grinning. “You’d never beat me, obviously, but you could easily smash the others in our classes.”

“Meh,” Will said, shrugging.

Eliza rolled her eyes. “You could get really good results if you

put in even the slightest amount of effort.”

“I did once, and they just thought I’d cheated,” Will said, and Eliza barked out a laugh. “So I stopped. And what’s the point of effort anyway? I’m already making bank.” He nodded towards the bookshelf where the ring was stashed.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe prepare yourself for a life *not* of crime?”

“I’m no criminal,” Will said, his voice taking on a haughty air. “I just take advantage of beneficial situations.”

“Like online gambling?” Eliza said, her tone becoming taunting, her eyes still on the laptop screen.

Will scowled. A month ago he’d been busted by the police for online gambling using... innovative methods.

“You’re just lucky that you’ve got Jeff,” Eliza said. “If I’d been caught: I’d have been grounded until graduation. And maybe even longer, if they could manage it. Jeff didn’t even punish you.”

Will shrugged. His uncle had just talked to some guys he knew in the police, and that was the end of it. He’d barely even yelled.

“He’s been more bi-polar than usual, lately,” he said, his voice dropping low.

Eliza paused in her video editing and glanced over at him. “Any clue why?”

Will shook his head, his eyes back on the screen. It wasn’t the kind of thing that he and Jeff talked about. Why Jeff seemed overly happy, jovial and joking around one minute, and distant and abrupt the next, was beyond him.

Of course, Will knew that Jeff loved him. And had done – was still doing – the best he could, raising a kid that wasn’t his. When Will had come to him, Jeff had been in his late-twenties and full party mode. And that had all been cut abruptly short by... Will.

Sometimes he thought it would have been better if, maybe, Jeff had ever had a girlfriend. But somehow, though he’d never say it,

even to Eliza, Will suspected that it was part of Jeff's way of punishing himself for what had happened. That there was only one role that Jeff was entitled to now, and that was being Will's guardian.

"Okay, done," Eliza said, finishing the edit on the video and hitting the render command. She glanced at Will. "At least Jeff's usually around," she said. "It's been two months since Dad was home." Eliza's dad, a management analyst for some company defined by a bunch of words like *corporate* and *conglomerate* and *international*, travelled constantly.

Will nodded. "Yeah, I guess." He smiled for her sake, but it didn't go all the way down. Abby had been his mother's best friend. And when his parents died, Abby had made it clear that he was as good as blood, and he was always welcome in their home. But it wasn't really the same. Will was like an island, really. He'd always been alone. But sometimes he still caught himself wondering what it would be like to have parents that went away and travelled so much that you missed them being around.

*

The next morning, with Will's ring in her pocket, Eliza sat beside Will on the early bus. The plan was to drop by his house and grab an experimental report that was due in their physics class today, before ducking into the pawn shop to collect Will's profit.

"I can just hand it in late," Will muttered, yawning, running his hand through his sandy-brown hair, the short waves messy. Probably un-brushed. Eliza repressed a sigh. He hadn't stopped whinging since they'd gotten up. In fact, he probably had been whinging in his sleep, since she'd reminded him at midnight before bed.

"You'll appreciate me one day," Eliza said, not looking up from the phone in her lap. Jasmine, a girl also in their physics class, had just texted her in psychedelic freak-out mode because she'd lost

the checklist of what was meant to be in the report. So of course, Eliza was the default backup checklist. She finished typing *CALM DOWN JASMINE* and started on the list that was embedded into her brain like a blueprint. “Like when you’re not getting expelled for being incomplete in every subject.”

“Hmm,” Will grumbled. “Hey. Check it out.” He tapped the window.

Eliza glanced up. The bus route hugged the base of Mount Coot-tha, the stubby mountain overlooking the city. “Yes, that’s a mountain, Will.”

He rolled his eyes. “I mean the wing suit guys.”

“Oh.” That was vaguely more interesting. Figuring Jasmine had survived this long already without the checklist, Eliza leaned over Will to peer upwards through the glass.

As they watched, a bright red speck trailing smoke flew down the side of the mountain. A second later, a grey blob exploded in the air above the speck and blossomed into the familiar shape of a parachute.

“They use tiny jet engines on their legs to give them the thrust they need, because Coot-tha’s too low for unpowered jumps,” Will said. “See the smoke?”

“Hmm,” Eliza said, still watching. “The things you know about things that no one cares about.”

Will jerked his knee and she yelped as it smacked her rib.

“Oops,” he said, and grinned, the morning light catching in his green-blue eyes as she drew back, scowling.

“What happens if the engines fail, then?” she said, her voice sulky.

“Splat, I guess,” Will said, and he widened his grin, baring his teeth at her like he was some kind of predatory animal. She rolled her eyes, and went back to solving Jasmine’s problems.

Five minutes later, the bus dropped them at the entrance to

Will's street. Nestled in the bushland at the end of the cul-de-sac, Jeff's modern brick house was a hundred metres from the nearest neighbours, but with the vegetation, it might as well have been kilometres.

The front door had a high-tech electronic keypad next to it. Will punched a sequence in.

"Eight-digit passcode," said Will, as the door chimed. "Take you weeks to try every combination."

"What are you, a piano virtuoso?" Eliza said. "More like a year."

"Whatever," Will said. He grabbed the handle and pushed hard. Eliza glimpsed the metal bracing running along the sides of the door as it swung open.

"Uncle Jeff," Will called. His voice echoed. Eliza shivered. It felt cold, too still. Not lived in. She followed Will to the kitchen, the stark, almost bland décor of the place striking her as always. Jeff was some kind of freelance security analyst, she knew that much. Will didn't say much about Jeff's work, because he didn't know much either, beyond that he worked on contracts for the government and multinational corporations.

"Is he working?" Eliza asked, her voice sounding too-small in the cavernous space. There was a reason they gravitated towards hanging out at her home. Because it was... well, a home.

"He could be in his study," Will said, but his voice sounded uncertain. Eliza nodded. Every time she'd ever been here in living memory, Jeff had emerged bleary-eyed and distracted from his study.

Will flicked a light switch, but the room stayed dark.

"Is your power out?" Eliza asked, opening the fridge. Nothing but shadowy darkness around a few cola cans, take-away containers and condiment bottles, though a wash of cool air trickled out. "The door thing's still working."

“It’s on a different system,” Will said, his voice sounding strange. Flat, kind of muted. He strode down the hallway, and she followed. Eliza realised her heart was pounding. The silent house, and the shadowy lack of power: it was creepy.

Will froze, beyond her, at the end of the hall. “Holy crap,” he said, his voice low.

“What?” she said, but before he could answer, she reached Jeff’s study and saw for herself.

Thousands of sheets of paper littered the floor. The drawers had been pulled out of the filing cabinet and desk in the room and upturned. A computer case lay ripped open, its cables spilling out. Intricate spaceship models had been ripped apart and scattered across the room.

“What the hell happened?” she breathed.

Will’s face was stiff, and he pulled his phone from his pocket with jerky movements. He dialled a number, and after a few seconds, there was a ringing sound from beneath the clutter of papers.

Gingerly, Eliza stepped over the broken plastic and strewn wires, and brushed aside the papers. Beneath, there was a small, black mobile.

She reached out for it, then hesitated. Was this a crime scene? Should she touch anything?

She glanced back up at Will, but the doorway was empty. Heart racing, she grabbed the phone, and ran after him.

He was standing in the doorway to the garage.

“His car’s gone,” Will said, his voice flat. “He doesn’t go anywhere without his phone.”

“Maybe he forgot,” Eliza said, but it sounded false, pointless, even to her. Tentatively, she reached out, putting her hand on Will’s arm. “He probably wasn’t even here, when they...”

She trailed off, and swallowed hard.

“Yeah,” Will said. He was still staring blankly, into the empty garage.

“We need to call the police,” Eliza said. Will didn’t answer. She shook his arm, and finally, he looked at her. A pang went through her. In the semi-light his eyes were shadowed. Flat and empty.

“What?” he said.

“I’m going to call the police. Okay?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

She tore her eyes away from him. From his face that looked like someone had just slapped him. And she dialled triple-zero on her phone.

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MICHAEL is an Associate Professor who conducts interdisciplinary research at the boundary between robotics and neuroscience, and a multi-award winning educational entrepreneur. He has written and produced a series of innovative textbooks for high school students, and is a passionate advocate for scientific and mathematical literacy. His company *Math Thrills* (MathThrills.com) uses mass market entertainment to stealthily engage everyone in key mathematical and scientific concepts, and creates resources that empower educators to use

JEMMA has been teaching physics, general science and mathematics to Sunshine Coast teenagers since 2010. She has a Bachelor of Science Communication, a Graduate Diploma of Education and a Master of Education. When not teaching, Jemma writes. Science shows that the universe works in bizarre but understandable ways, and Jemma writes to explore the line between "what is" and "what if". Jemma lives in the Sunshine Coast hinterland and can be found online at www.jcpollari.com

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