

THE WORLD'S FIRST MATH THRILLER...



A
QUESTION
OF WILL

MICHAEL MILFORD

Chapter 1.

The Port of Brisbane's sprawling expanse of concrete 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 to his left 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.

"Handgun mags?"

Drake withdrew a mag from a pouch on his belt and threw it. "Last one – make it count." He realized he was shouting to overcome the ringing in his ears. "They're wearing vests – I hit one with 3 rounds in the chest and he didn't drop. Go for the head."

The sergeant reloaded and fired two rounds. As return fire hammered the other 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 slung over their shoulders. Shifting another step to his right, Drake saw a third man standing on the boat deck. He passed a metal crate to the men, who loaded it into the back of a large 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 stepped back into cover, cursing himself for being inattentive.

“Watch out for the sniper up that crane,” said Drake. “Whatever they’re loading can’t be good. We gotta stop them before they get away.”

“What exactly are we gonna stop them with?” said the sergeant. “I’ve got less bullets left than bad guys, and they’ve got bloody assault rifles.”

The man on the boat deck jumped down and ran to a black ute in front of the van. Drake’s mind raced. Hold tight and wait for help. But the bad guys would get away. Charge the van and truck. But the sniper would nail them before they got close.

“We’ve got another problem,” said the sergeant, pointing at a line of tanks just 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. Suddenly he lurched backwards as a torrent of brown liquid spewed forth. He turned and ran towards the ute, which screeched into motion as he jumped into the back. Behind him the fuel flowed steadily into the warehouse. Towards the burning crates.

Drake’s nostrils flared as the dizzying fuel fumes wafted over them. He looked at the shotgun in his hands and swore softly. “You reckon you’ve got any chance of hitting that sniper sergeant?”

“Sure sir, this baby’s accurate to half a klick,” said the sergeant, patting the barrel of his handgun. “Look, maybe the sniper’s cleared out too.”

Holding the butt of the shotgun with two fingers, Drake stuck it above the top of the shipping container. It exploded into kindling. “Nope,” he said, brushing splinters out of his hair. “Did anyone in our squad bring along any long arms?” said Drake, “Anything like a sharpshooter for example?”

“Not exactly. Benson had an M4, but the bastards got him the last time we moved. I’ll cover you if you wanna go get it.”

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.

"Alright sergeant. When I break cover, you open up at that sniper. Keep his head down long enough for me to grab it and run back here."

Drake took a few deep breaths then exploded forwards. Behind him the sergeant fired steadily. Drake skidded, scooped at the rifle with his left hand and pushed off the ground with his right. A bullet hissed past. Accelerating, he dived the last metres back into cover, rolled off his stomach and shifted his back against the container. Patting himself down, he grinned. "No holes sergeant."

"How do you feel about crispiness?" said the sergeant, pointing. The fuel was lapping at the first of the burning crates.

Drake pulled out the magazine and his grin vanished. "Better get ready to run for it," he said.

"Might be one in the chamber?"

Drake opened the chamber and his face took on a beet red hue. "One shot," he said gruffly. Examining the rifle, he found the scope was intact. He just needed a range to dial it in. "You haven't got a laser rangefinder have you?"

"Sure," said the sergeant. "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 ago, 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 300, could be 500 – hard to tell,” said the sergeant, pulling his head back behind the container. A bullet punched a hole in the concrete where the sergeant’s head had just been. “Something tells me *he* knows what the range is.”

Drake tried to remember his training. 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. 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. Miraculously it didn’t ignite.

“Impatient isn’t he?” said the sergeant. “Whatever you’re planning sir, we have to do it now.”

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.

“That’s it,” yelled Drake. “Sergeant, how many rounds do you have left?”

The sergeant pulled out the magazine.

“Two sir.”

Alright, when I say go, you stick your head up and fire off one round.”

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

“Okay sergeant...GO!”

The sergeant stood, sighted briefly and shot off a round. 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.

He nodded at the sergeant, who fired another round. The responding sniper bullet passed overhead and smashed into the back wall of the warehouse. This time the display showed 0:01:24.

“I need you to double check some math for me,” said Drake, his fingers furiously pressing buttons on the watch. What’s the sum of 117,” – another button press – “and 124?”

“241,” said the sergeant immediately.

“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 the sergeant after barely a second.

Drake raised his eyebrows at the sergeant, who 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.

“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. Try making a run for that pile of crates.”

The sergeant crouched down into a sprint position, still clutching the handgun in one hand. As he dropped it onto the concrete, a smile spread across his face.

“What’s so funny?” said Drake.

“I still owe the bookies three hundred dollars. Don’t suppose I’ll have to pay if this doesn’t work.”

“When this works, I’ll happily pay it myself” said Drake. “On three.”

“One”.

“Two”.

“THREE!”

The sergeant sprinted for the crates, 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 upward movement of the rifle and nestled the butt deeper into his shoulder. The sniper fired again, the flash lighting up his hiding spot. Drake ignored the nearby muffled cry that followed the shot and focused on shifting the crosshair until it lay centred on the sniper's head. Then, breathing out with unblinking eyes, his finger squeezed the trigger.

He kept his eye at the scope, imagining the bullet flying through the air. Then, silently, the sniper's head snapped backwards out of sight. For what seemed like an eternity Drake couldn't tell if he'd got a hit or if the sniper was taking cover. Then the head reappeared, slowly lolling forward to hang limply off the edge of the platform. Only then did Drake draw back his head and yell out to the sergeant.

"Got him. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Okay," said the sergeant, his voice quiet in the silence after the gunfire.

Drake swapped the M4 for the shotgun and ran towards the pile of crates. The sergeant was lying with his back against a crate, blood spreading out from where his hands were clutching his right thigh.

"Just a flesh wound," said the sergeant. He tried to get up but swore as he crumpled forward onto his injured leg.

Drake dropped the shotgun and put his left arm under the sergeant's shoulder, pulling him to his feet. Together they staggered around the burning crates and bodies and emerged into the open air. Drake heard a *whoompf* and glanced back to see that the fuel had reached the first burning crate. A wall of flames roared towards the tanks. Drake broke into a run, dragging the sergeant towards a ladder leading down to the water. But as Drake glanced back

again he could see flames licking at the first tank. He tightened his hold on the sergeant and charged over the edge.

Dropping through the air Drake heard the *crump* of an explosion behind them and felt an intense heat on his back. A sheet of fire shot out over their heads and reached down towards them. But the water was approaching rapidly, and just before the flames engulfed them they plunged under. Drake momentarily had a vision of them surfacing into a raging inferno, but the flames dissipated quickly, and when their heads breached the surface seconds later, they sucked in fresh air.

For a few glorious moments, the dead police and the aching pains in his bruised and battered body were all forgotten. Drake bobbed in the water and enjoyed the feeling of being alive.

“You reckon it was drugs?” said the sergeant through grimaced teeth.

“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. “Whatever it was, there was a lot of it – that van’s tyres were rubbing against the frame.”

“And those guys were equipped,” said the sergeant. “Assault rifles, tactical gear.”

“Yeah. Not exactly your typical drug dealing hippies.”

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 2.

Will's eyes narrowed as he looked across the shopping centre at the banners plastered over the jewellery store windows. A shop assistant had just finished attaching the largest and gaudiest of the banners, which read:

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

"Bingo," he said, turning to look down at the boy beside him.

"I just don't see how your plan is going to work," said the boy, rubbing his eyes under his glasses. "Surely no one's dumb enough to fall for it."

"Ahh, but that's where you're wrong Besra. Didn't you see who's rostered on tonight?" Will said, a smug smile on his face.

Besra shook his head and looked back at the store. His eyes widened as a hulking teenage boy stood up from behind a counter.

"Carl? In a jewellery store? Shouldn't he be out looking for nerds to beat up?"

"His dad owns the store, remember," said Will.

"Right. I dunno. He's a prick but even he can't be that stupid," said Besra.

"Maybe not, but that's not all I'm relying on," said Will. "This is the best score I've been able to come up with since the online money dried up. And it's a one-time deal obviously, tonight only," he said, waving at the banner. "So are you still in?"

Besra took off his glasses and polished the lenses.

"Yeah, let's teach him a lesson. What do you want me to do?"

"See the shop assistant?"

Besra nodded.

"I need you to distract her and keep her away from Carl. Make up something believable."

“What about a necklace for my girl?” said Besra.

“You did hear me say believable? I was thinking more along the lines of... a present for your mum’s birthday or something.” said Will. Besra shoved him hard enough to make him stagger backwards.

“Alright, alright,” said Will. He pulled out his wallet and rifled through a wad of crisp new hundred dollar notes and handed a couple to Besra. Then he reached into his other pocket and pulled out a large black button attached to a small plastic box. Undoing the middle button of his shirt, he clipped the black button in its place, and fed the cable and black box through his shirt and into his back side pants pocket. Patting it down, he looked at Besra quizzically.

“Can’t see it,” said Besra. “Hidden camera?”

“Yep,” said Will.

“Alrighty,” said Besra. Will watched him enter the store and waited until the store assistant approached him. Then he followed him in, casually reaching into his right pocket and flicking the switch on the box.

Carl’s back was to him as he approached the counter. He turned around when Will cleared his throat. Will smiled at him, looking him in the eye. He was almost as tall as Carl, but lighter and faster. They’d scuffled once after a rugby match got heated. Both had ended up with a black eye. Carl glowered at him for a couple of seconds but was the first to break eye contact.

“What do you want?” said Carl, scowling.

“My older brother sent me to pick something up for him.”

Will pulled out his wallet and took out the wad of money, resting it on the bench top casually. As Carl saw the money, the scowl softened and his back straightened. The

aggression was replaced with Carl's impersonation of a smiling salesman, an attempt that Will noted fell far short of its goal.

"He needs a ring to propose to his missus, but he's off working in the mines," said Will, walking sideways and surveying the rings in the cabinet. As he walked he tapped the wad of bills against the bench top. 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 miserably.

"What about that one?" said Will, gesturing towards a case full of diamond rings. Carl slid over to the case and unlocked the glass door.

"The big one, the two carat diamond," said Will, pointing at a shiny gold ring topped with a massive sparkling diamond. The attached price tag showed \$35,990.

The hand that was pushing the cabinet door open paused. Will pulled out his wallet again and extracted a second, even thicker wad of money. Carl's eyes narrowed for a moment, flicking between the money and Will's face. Then he shrugged, reached into the cabinet and delicately removed the ring. While Carl was extracting the ring, Will sneaked a glance back at Besra. The shop assistant was hunched over examining a sparkling necklace and talking animatedly with Besra. So far, so good. It was time for the second part of his plan.

"Obviously I'm going to pay cash. I guess you'll need to get that cleared with your boss over there," said Will, nodding at Carl's co-worker.

"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 closed the ring box and slid it into a small paper bag.

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

Carl looked down at the register and ran his finger along the buttons, mouthing the labels printed on them.

“Half-price”

“Members’ Discount”

“5% off”

“10% off”

The discount buttons ran in 5% increments all the way to 95% off. Holding his breath, Will waited. Then he saw Carl look up towards the other shop assistant with a look of doubt on his face.

Bingo again.

“If you don’t know what to do, I can go ask her,” said Will, who started moving towards the other side of the store.

“No! I can handle it,” said Carl. Reaching across the counter, he dragged over a brochure and opened it to the page showing the discount. Carl laboriously typed 35999 into the register and then pressed the 50% off button. Furrowing his brow, he ran a finger along the “take a further 45% off that” part of the text. He hit the 45% off button, but nothing happened. Unbeknownst to him, the system could only apply a single discount. Will knew this, because he had researched the store’s point of sale system. Any discount had to be entered in one go.

“I’m gonna miss my movie – can’t you just get her to do this?”

Will 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”.

“Geez, alright, alright.”

Carl's jaw clenched spasmodically as his eyes flicked between the register and the shop assistant at the other side of the store.

"Look," said Will, his tone disinterested, "It's just 95% off isn't it? I mean, 50 + 45 is 95, right?"

Carl grunted and entered 50 plus 45 into the register. The screen flashed 95 back at him.

"Looks right," said Will, nodding.

Carl repeated the calculation, with the same result. He glanced at Will, perhaps looking for any sign of deception, but Will's face was expressionless. Turning back to the register, Carl sighed loudly and entered 35999 in again. But this time he pressed the 95% off button. 1799.95 appeared on the screen.

"Eighteen hundred dollars," snarled Carl.

Before Carl could think too much about the amount, Will held up the wad of hundred dollar bills and thumbed out eighteen onto the counter. 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. As the register noisily printed out the receipt, Will looked over his shoulder to see Besra leaving the shop with shopping bag.

"Here's the receipt," said Carl, dropping it next to the ring. Behind him, the store's backroom door squeaked open. A heavysset older man in a suit emerged. As Carl turned to see who it was, Will swiped the bag and receipt off the countertop and bolted out of the shop. Rejoining Besra outside, they walked briskly away from the gallery of shops and towards the crowded food court. Only then did they stop behind a large pot plant and look back.

"Any second now," said Will.

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 came down 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 Besra could hear the rising voices in the store.

"That's his Dad," said Will.

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. But Will and Besra were well hidden. After a few seconds standing outside his store, his hands on his hips, he turned back and re-entered the store, his head downcast.

"Okay, he does not look happy," said Besra.

"Yeah, well that's what happens when you blow \$8100."

"Man, I wish I could have heard his dad," said Besra, grinning from ear to ear. "I bet he's not meant to make a sale like that by himself. What an idiot."

"We can stash it at your place tonight," said Will. "I figure I can pawn it for eight grand no problems," said Will. "That'll leave us more than six grand up..." He broke off as he saw Besra's face fall.

"There's no way he's going to let us get away with it," said Besra sombrely. "He'll make life a living hell for us at school."

"I thought of that, so I made sure we have some insurance," said Will. "Apart from being an upstanding young citizen, what other shining personal qualities does Carl have?"

"Well, he's up himself for one," said Besra after a moment's thought.

"Exactly," said Will, as he unbuttoned the front of his shirt and detached the camera.

"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?"