

MORTICE
JUSTICE MORT STYLE

BOOK TWO

A J WILTON

1

Smoke on the Water seeps into my brain. *Shit, the phone's ringing!*

I grab it off the bedside table, and a voice I recognise says, 'Ireland?'

'Yes, sir.'

I'm wide awake now. For Major General Charles Rutherford – MGC for short, due to his initials and his love of cricket – to be wide awake and issuing orders at this time of night, something must be amiss.

'There's a plane landing at Archerfield Airport at 6:00 a.m. I need both of you on it. Full kits. Incoming briefing notes by email.'

'Understood, sir. I'll get Pig sorted.'

'Good. See you in a few hours.'

He hangs up. Of course, Suzie's wide awake beside me now. 'What's going on?' she asks.

'Not sure yet. They sent a plane for Pig and me. That's all I know,' I reply as I dial Pig. He answers his phone.

'Wakey wakey,' I say, and get a grunt in response. 'We're on. Full kits. They have a plane landing at 6:00 a.m. at Archerfield.' Archerfield is a small commercial airfield on Brisbane's south side, and the closest to me, either by accident or design. I pause to let Pig digest this, and when he grunts acknowledgement (that's two

grunts from my favourite Pig already!), I continue, 'So why don't you pick me up?'

'Okay, I'll swing by around 5:00 a.m. That gives us heaps of time to make sure we aren't late.'

'Done.' I hang up.

Suzie's now sitting up, watching me with a little frown of concern, so I lean over and give her a quick kiss. 'Sorry, Lord and Master is calling.'

Of course, she wants to know way more than I know, and I tell her she knows as much as I do at present. Out of bed, I check my iPad. There's an official Section V email waiting for me, which I flick to Pig before glancing through it. There'll be time to read it once we're on our way, but it looks like we're heading via Canberra to Yass, where they're expecting a major incident from a far-right militia group set up on an isolated farm.

As Suzie has also signed the Official Secrets Act, I toss my iPad to her (gently, of course!) whilst I head to the bathroom. I need to have a good clean-up – I'm not sure when the next one will be. I know, I know, it's not exactly third-world around Yass, but you never know what time might permit!

After a quick shower, I pull out my 'go bag' from the back of the robe, which is always fully packed for occasions exactly like this. I keep a sealing tag in the locks so I know it hasn't been opened, just as a safeguard against 'borrowing' something from it and not replacing it. It has all the essentials – clothes, a spare set of boots, full wet weather gear, snack bars and water bottles. I carry it into the kitchen, where Suzie's making two coffees in travel mugs, one for me and the other for Pig. She's a darling, this one – even a keeper – so of course I tell her this as well. More brownie points, after all!

Then it's down to the gun safe. I pull out my and Pig's weapons of choice, our H&K USP handguns and EF88 assault rifles. Pig doesn't have a gun safe, and since we're now authorised to hold and carry weapons because of our involvement with Section V, we keep them all here. I grab Pig's latest (and new favourite) drone, Bernie. Yes, he names all his drones – however, I can't criticise, as I named my sniper rifle Betsy.

I go back up the stairs into the kitchen, where Suzie's having a coffee. She admits she's unlikely to get back to sleep, and briefs me on what the email said. It isn't a lot more than what I gleaned from my quick glance, simply that there's an anticipated domestic terrorist attack from this far-right paramilitary group, the Southern Cross Resistance, that needs to be snuffed out quickly. No mention of why the Glory Boys from the SAS aren't being called in, but we signed up to serve our country, so like all good soldiers, ours is not to reason why. It's a question I'll be asking when we arrive, though!

At 4:55 a.m., I hear the Camry pull up in the driveway. Suzie and I have a farewell kiss, and I'm told to be careful. 'I still have plans for you!' is her parting shot as I head off, silently closing the door behind me.

Pig has popped the boot open but remains sitting in the driver's seat with a smart-arse smirk on his face. I nearly leave his coffee on the roof, but hey, I'm not the nasty type. Fortunately, the Camry has a big boot, so two duffels, a drone case and two gun cases all squeeze in. I hop into the passenger seat and slip Pig's coffee into the cup holder. We fist bump before he backs out and we're on the road.

At this time of day, Archerfield Airport is only twenty minutes away, so we're nice and early. We lug our gear through the

terminal, where there's only a night manager on duty. Thanks to our Section V passes, our security screening is waived, so we sit down and wait.

We're good at waiting. We both had fifteen years of practice whilst serving in the Australian Army at various battlefields around the globe, including two extended tours of duty in Afghanistan. At 5:45 a.m., I get up and wander through to the canteen, which is mainly for the use of pilots and staff, but at this time of the day, who cares?

Whilst waiting for the jug to boil, I text Maria, our part-time colleague, telling her 'You're it for a few days, as duty calls.'

Of course, I get an immediate response – she does have four young kids, so this isn't early for her – saying, 'Lucky shits. Be careful. So, I get to sit in the BIG chair!'

I reply, 'And don't make a mess in it!'

Maria is also ex-army, 1st New Zealand Regiment, and has done some fun tasks for us over time. We're training her in the finer points of our business, so this will be a further learning period for her.

I make four black coffees and go back to join Pig just as the duty manager comes out to say our flight has landed. Out with the duffels, gun cases and coffees we go. And there, coming to a stop in front of us, is a Falcon 7X of the RAAF VIP Squadron.

Pig and I look at each other with raised eyebrows. We sure are moving up the chain!

We head out onto the apron. The young copilot lowers the stairs, and once they're in position, I head up with my load, followed by Pig. Inside, the senior pilot stands at the door to the cockpit. I pass a coffee to him, and he says, 'We do have a full coffee machine on board, so you needn't have bothered.'

I smile. 'I guess we're used to old transports, not these fancy machines.'

'If it hadn't been such an early start, on such short notice, we would've had a steward on board to wait on you hand and foot.'

Wow, I think, how the other half live!

'So, you're the famed Mort and Pig,' he continues. 'I'm honoured to meet you both.' We shake all round. The young copilot is looking a bit puzzled, so he says, 'These two have won a few battles you and I would wet ourselves just thinking about, so they deserve the full treatment.' He nods to us. 'I'll get us underway. It's a one hour and forty-five minute flight time, so make yourselves comfy. After take-off, you're welcome to help yourselves to anything in the bar or kitchen.'

Pig and I settle into our seats, strap ourselves in, and await the start of another journey into the unknown.

2

As the plane takes off effortlessly into the awakening sky, I close my eyes. My mind drifts back over the four months since my and Pig's hunt for a bent cop. Suzie – my then-girlfriend, now partner – was kidnapped, and the Queensland State Government was crippled, but Pig and I brought the whole episode to a successful, if dramatic, conclusion. As a consequence, we'd been appointed as members of Section V under the control of Major General Charles Rutherford.

After the dust settled, all three of us took a break up on Fraser Island. When we arrived home, Suzie and I decided to move in together. As Pig was using the second bedroom at that time, a simple swap seemed the best solution. Well, except Suzie wasn't going into the second bedroom, I hasten to add, although it's fair to say she's taken it over with all her 'junk'. I made a bit of a ceremony scanning her thumbprints into our security system, ensuring she understood the significance of it, and making her promise never to roll her eyes about our security again!

Before Pig moved into her apartment, though, she insisted on doing a real tenant interview, which I thoroughly enjoyed sitting on the sidelines of. I guess he must've passed, because he's quite settled there now.

As Suzie and I have adapted to living together, we've had quite a few little battles – over bathrooms, hanging space, cooking, TV remotes, and so on – all of which have been fun. I certainly can't claim to have won many, although I have clung onto my wardrobe (well, a quarter of it!) and the ensuite. I told Suzie she has too much junk for the ensuite, so she's taken over the main bathroom as her own. Along with all the wardrobe space of the second bedroom. But you guys out there know what I mean!

Suzie and I had agreed to prioritise heading up to Bundaberg to spend a weekend with her parents. One public holiday weekend, we headed off just after 10:00 on the Friday morning, making it comfortably to lunch with my dad on Bribie Island on the way. Suzie hadn't met him yet, but they'd spoken a couple of times on the phone.

When we pulled into Dad's driveway, he was busy under the bonnet of his old Nissan Patrol. Here I was thinking he'd be inside getting lunch ready. He popped his head out, wiping his hands on an old oily rag (old habits die hard!).

Suzie jumped out of the car. Before I could introduce them, she gave him a hug, and asked, 'So, what's wrong with the Patrol?'

'Oh, nothing really. Just pottering.'

Suzie poked her head under the bonnet, and they were soon talking about carburettors, points, spark plugs – a foreign language to me! I left them to it and headed inside. Immediately, I smelled fresh fish cooking, and lo and behold, a lady came bustling out of Dad's kitchen. She stopped in her tracks upon seeing me, her hand going up to her mouth.

I smiled and put my hand out. 'Hi, I'm Mort.'

'Lovely to meet you. Chris is always talking about you. I'm Agnes.'

Just then, Dad rushed in behind me, a little rattled, I think, that Agnes and I had met without him introducing us. ‘Ah, Mort, Agnes and I have sort of become friends lately, so I thought it would be nice for you to meet her. She offered to cook lunch, which is better than anything I could concoct.’

Of course, I couldn’t resist. ‘*Friends*, ah?’ I asked, giving Agnes a wink so she knew I was teasing. Dad was stammering again, so I quickly let him off the hook, reaching out to pull him into a hug. ‘That’s great, Dad! Hope she doesn’t have to clean up after you all the time.’ And I added, in a whisper, ‘Mum will be pleased for you.’

Once things settled down again, Suzie and Dad were quickly back to chatting about engines, and Patrols in particular. Suzie’s passion for the subject was clear for all to see, and Dad must’ve just been happy to have someone to talk cars with. They’d never been particularly interesting to Mum or me. The lunch of freshly grilled whiting Dad had caught that morning was a delight, but as we had another four-plus hours to get to Bundy, we didn’t linger long.

As we exited Dad’s home, Suzie piped up, ‘I’ll drive if you like,’ holding her hand out for the keys. I passed them over – as if I had a choice!

Back on the Bruce Highway, I watched Suzie as she gave the Camry some gas and noticed it was pretty responsive. I tried to keep a straight face. To make this easier, I closed my eyes, but the surging of the car told me she was still puzzled. Eventually, she had to say something, and came out with, ‘This goes much better than an ordinary Camry. How come?’

Still with my eyes closed, I replied, ‘How many Camrys have you driven?’

‘None like this. Why?’

I couldn’t keep a straight face any longer, so I opened my eyes and, grinning, said, ‘It’s chipped. All three of my cars are chipped. You don’t know when we might need to get somewhere quickly, or disappear quickly.’

‘But you drive like a grandfather,’ she replied, disgusted.

‘Well, I don’t like to attract attention and don’t see the need to speed when I’m not in a hurry.’

Of course, this concept was totally foreign to Suzie, who had a few speeding tickets racked up. But that wasn’t slowing her down – now she knew she had more power than she’d expected.

‘Drive like a grandfather’ – the cheek of her! I thought.

Only three and a half hours later, we pulled into her parents’ driveway. Driving Suzie speed! They lived out of Bundy on a few acres, and her dad still pottered around in his mechanical repair workshop, even though he’d officially retired.

As we exited the car, I could sense the excitement emanating from Suzie. She was clearly thrilled to be home, and – so I liked to think, at least – keen to show me around. She grabbed my hand as her parents, Henry and Caroline, emerged from their veranda and came down the path to greet us. They were followed by the family hound, Rufus, an aging ‘bitzer’ and beloved member of the family, whose tail was wagging furiously. Suzie quickly ruffled his ears after hugging her parents.

After the greetings, we had an afternoon tea of homemade scones, fresh cream (yes, they have their own cow out back), and strawberry jam. Heaven for a sweet tooth like me! Suzie warned me that if I ate too many, I wouldn’t be able to eat my dinner, to which I replied, ‘Watch me!’ (I almost said ‘Yes, Mum’ as well.)

Once we’d all had our fill, Suzie dragged me off to show me

the rest of the house. It was a typical country Queenslander, with most of the living upstairs and the laundry and garage downstairs, originally designed to improve air flow in the humid tropical seasons. The tour culminated in her old bedroom, which was still papered with posters of Madonna and Hanson and swimmer Suzie O'Neil – Madam Butterfly, as she was called in her heyday – a local world-class athlete and winner of eight Olympic medals. I pulled Suzie into my arms and whispered, 'So, what secrets could this bed tell me, ah?'

I got a quick peck and a push off. She hurried back out of the room, I suspect a little embarrassed. I reckoned I needed to revisit that question a little later!

In the hall, Caroline caught up with us. 'Mort, I've prepared Nat's old room for you. I hope you don't mind, but the rooms are quite small, so I don't think you could share Suzie's.'

I replied, 'That's fine, Mrs Dunn. I just hope Suzie can cope without me for a couple of nights.' This got me another dig in the ribs.

'Please, call me Caroline. Mrs Dunn sounds so old!'

We wandered outside, and I once again found I was holding Suzie's hand. I swear I didn't know how that happened, but hey, I wasn't fighting it. I was liking it!

Henry joined us as we headed towards the vegie patch, which he appeared to look after, whilst Caroline took care of the lovely shrubs and flower gardens. There were some dozen chooks scratching around, and Caroline said proudly that she hadn't had to buy eggs since the girls were little. So, they sourced their eggs and vegies from their garden, and with a couple of heifers and sheep also grazing in their paddocks, I reckoned their weekly shopping bill was rather light!

Once we'd finished the tour of the gardens, Suzie again grabbed my hand and we headed off towards her dad's workshop, which had a few old stock cars and other wrecks lying around. Suzie made a beeline to the one in best condition, which looked to me like an old-model Holden Commodore. She pulled the bonnet latch up and peered at the engine.

'Does it still go, Dad?' she asked.

'Did the other day when I fired it up,' he replied.

All of a sudden, Suzie was squeezing herself through the driver's window slot (the only way to enter those cars, I'm told). I commented, 'Very ladylike,' getting me a poked tongue once she'd righted herself in the driver's seat.

She strapped herself into the full racing harness, and fired up the engine with a mighty growl. As she dabbed the throttle, I watched the smile on her face. Clearly, she was enjoying herself. Then she engaged first gear and gave it a boot. Powered by the big Chevy 450, she was off with a loud roar. There was a clear path around the workshop, likely a practice track for testing the cars whilst they were being repaired.

Rufus came running down, barking at the loud noise, as Suzie slid sideways around the corner, making Henry and me step back as she buried her foot in the accelerator again. She made four or five laps before coming to a halt and telling me, 'Come on, in you get. I'll give you a ride.'

Of course, I couldn't say no – I wouldn't hear the end of it – so I squeezed my big frame through the window and tried to securely belt myself into the passenger seat. She didn't wait for me to finish. Off we went into the first corner, and she kept her foot down. Hard. I wasn't sure if she was trying to impress me by scaring me, but I wasn't letting anything show!

After another few laps, she slowed down, laughing. She turned the engine off, almost wistful when she said, 'Gee, that was great. Wish I could do that more often.'

I leaned over and gave her a kiss. 'It was great to see you have fun.'

'But I didn't manage to scare you, did I?'

'No,' I replied, 'you know what I've been through. A bit of fast tracking in dirt is exciting, not scary!'

In Afghanistan, I'd survived an IED explosion that tipped our Bushmaster over, crushing Pig's leg. Whilst we tried to save it, we'd then come under heavy enemy fire. I'd been in numerous other battles and firefights that kept me on my toes, most of which Suzie wasn't aware of. Those were a lot more challenging than holding on for dear life whilst Suzie had fun. But I didn't voice that and take her pleasure away.

All of a sudden, the day was ending, so we all wandered back up to the house, where Henry and I settled on the veranda for a beer whilst the girls busied themselves preparing dinner. The rest of the weekend passed quickly. Suzie showed me around her hometown, and we even met a couple of her former school classmates. When it was time to head home, back to Brisbane, Suzie quickly jumped into the driver's seat, so I warned her, 'Don't forget, any speeding tickets are your responsibility.'

Of course, she ignored me.