

# The Unbroken Line

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## Extract

### One

It had been six weeks, almost to the day, since he'd had a drink. Remembering the last glass summoned images of that desperate night – the blade glinting under streetlights before it rose again, steaming with his blood in the winter air.

Will Harris took another sip from the champagne Eva had ordered for them.

'It must feel good to be out of that wheelchair,' Eva said, no doubt seeing the veil of memory descend across his face.

The restaurant had been Eva's idea – a date to reboot the fraught circumstances of their meeting; a balance against her holding his wounds closed until the ambulance had arrived.

'Adversity may have a way of bringing people together,' she said, 'but more often it fucks them up.'

Will nodded. 'It does. No changing the way we met,' he said. 'Just what we do from here.'

Earlier they had watched as the setting sun bathed orange light over the pale gums that grew along the banks of the Yarra. From their place above the canopy they could see the turgid water as it traced its way through the wealthy suburbs towards the darkening city and on, again, into the black inevitability of the ocean.

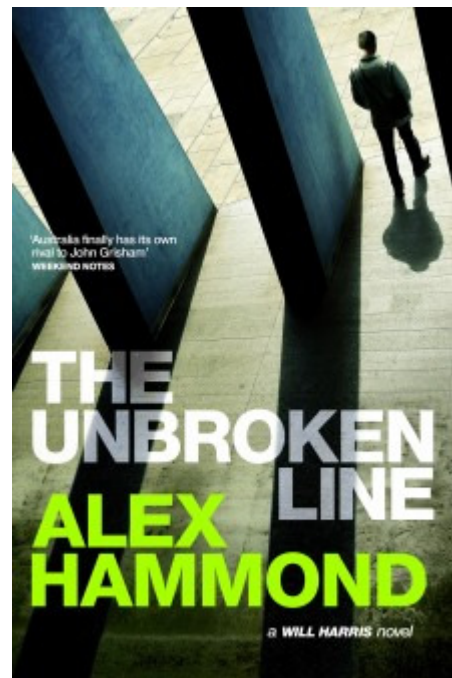
With the arrival of dusk a low line of bats had emerged into the air and even now, as they waited for dessert, the procession continued.

Around Will, the other diners were talking and eating artfully arranged meals on oversized plates lying on bright, starched tablecloths. He drained the glass in his hand and focused his attention on the woman sitting in front of him. Her dark hair was lifted up off her shoulders while her fringe was swept into a wave. Her olive skin contrasted with her yellow silk dress. Its low neckline suggested something of the tone she'd set for the evening.

She smiled at him. He could bask in her warm gaze forever. To simply sit here, with her – that would be reward enough, for everything he had overcome. And yet he couldn't help himself from speculating, from fantasising: the two of them carrying her boxes into his apartment; her hand clutching his at her first major exhibition; drunk nights and late mornings as the world was reduced to the circumference of their arms.

'So let's cut to the chase, champ,' Eva said, clearing the glassware in front of her so she could reach a hand out to his. As she leant forward the light from the candles glowed in her eyes. Her lips parted, revealing the gentle upward curve at the edges of her mouth.

'Now that you're out of that wheelchair and able to drive a girl to a fancy dinner, is it safe to say you're officially 'able-bodied'?' she whispered.



He leant in towards her, tensing his stomach muscles to ease the pain where the scars were still healing.

'Oh, absolutely. I would say that I'm well on my way to a full recovery.'

'Because I wouldn't want to set you back. Given how fragile you are.'

Will felt something touch the inside of his thigh. Her foot. Freed from its stiletto it was sliding up the inside of his leg.

'It's been a long time, Will Harris. And it's a terrible thing when a woman has to wait. Injured or not, there are repercussions.'

'That's completely understandable, of course. A man would have to make amends to a woman in this situation.'

'Oh, you don't know the half of it. Amends are barely the beginning.' Her foot tapped on him as though she were distracted by some other thought. 'Glad to see that I have your full attention.' Eva winked.

'Hey, Eva?'

'Yes?'

'Why are we whispering?'

'I don't know. Because it's seductive?' She broke into laughter.

'What's wrong with you?' He grinned back at her.

'You should have worked that out long before now.'

A waiter arrived beside their table with the dessert. 'Coconut sago with caramelised mango and salted caramel semifreddo.'

'Thanks,' said Will, trying not to blush as Eva's toes drummed across his erection.

'One other thing, sir,' the waiter said. 'The chef was wondering if he could get a photo with you both? He's thrilled to have you here.'

'Sure,' Will said. 'On our way out?'

'If that's convenient?'

'No problem,' Will replied. 'Could I grab an espresso? Sorry, two,' he corrected, as Eva held up two fingers.

'Of course, sir.'

Will paused until the waiter was out of earshot. 'Those things still make me feel uncomfortable.'

'The photos? You'll be fine,' Eva said between spoonfuls. 'People will forget soon enough. Or you could just say no.'

'But that feels rude.'

'Then enjoy it. You deserve it. You brought justice to a murdered girl, caught her killer, gave her family peace.'

'That's not how I remember it. You're leaving yourself out of that story.'

'Meh. I was just along for the ride.'

'Well, I hope they bring me my jacket first. I don't really need to be standing there with a hard-on immortalised on their Facebook page.'

'What a terrible dilemma,' Eva said, smiling.

As they crossed the car park, Will had to struggle to keep up. Even though he'd performed his exercises daily, moving was still a painful effort. His physiotherapist had reiterated to him the seriousness of the damage – his abdominal wall had been significantly traumatised; with his core injured, he would find even basic movements challenging. Although he was out of the wheelchair it would be months before he could start to think about any strenuous activity. As Eva swayed in front of him, her dress gripping the contours of her body, it occurred to Will that even though he'd spent so many hours with her, grieved with her, almost died beside her, he was deeply nervous about the raw, animal truth of their compatibility.

Eva leant back against Will's car, yellow outlined against the British racing green of the vintage Jag.

She pulled him forwards by the lapels, her body softening as she kissed him on the lips, her tongue penetrating deep into his mouth. He could taste the ethanol on her breath, smell the heady perfume that rose up from her to envelop him.

'Fuck,' she said, eventually pulling away. 'I've been wanting to do that ever since we started dinner.'

'Does that count for amends?'

'It's a start. I need you to take me home and fuck me.'

Will kissed her again as he pulled the car door open. Eva drew herself away from him and slid into the passenger seat. He moved as quickly as he could to the driver's side and got in.

'Are you okay to drive?' she said, fastening her seatbelt.

'I'm good.'

Will started the engine and Eva tucked her legs under her, turning towards him and placing her arm around his neck. He took them out of the car park and onto the road.

To their left was a steep bank leading down to the Yarra. A lone vessel, a party barge, drifted down the river. Flashing lights silhouetted its revellers and lit up the craft like a garish lantern on the dark water. To their right were old mill stacks, decaying warehouses and other modern ruins. With the streetlights passing overhead and Eva's head leaning against his shoulder, Will felt at peace. He'd almost forgotten what this satisfied calm felt like. Eva started to hum to herself as he merged into the traffic that led to the Domain Tunnel.

A black SUV crept out from behind Will and accelerated towards the tunnel, trying to overtake him. He slowed the Jag to let it pass.

Eva stroked the side of his face, stopping when he turned his head away from her.

'What's up?' she said, no longer humming.

Will looked into his side mirror at the SUV closing in. Something was off about the driver and the passenger sitting next to him.

They were both wearing black balaclavas.

'Eva. Sit up.'

'What is it?' she asked, straightening in her seat.

'Something's wrong,' he said, pulling the Jag into the passing lane and accelerating.

Eva looked over her shoulder at the SUV.

'Shit, Will.'

He pushed the accelerator to the floor and swerved the Jag around a slow-moving hatchback.

'How do you know they have anything to do with us?'

'I don't.'

*But it's the only possible explanation,* he thought.

The SUV returned to their rear-view mirror, keeping pace with the old Jag. The tunnel entrance was drawing closer.

*No turn-offs.*

'Jesus, Will, they're still there.'

His hands were shaking. 'Hold on.'

Will weaved around another car as the tunnel enveloped them. The bright strip lights raced overhead as the car started to shudder, mirroring the shaking of Will's hands on the steering wheel.

The SUV was closer now, despite his best efforts. With a pounding inevitability it was closing in.

Will looked up ahead. Traffic was thin in the tunnel. He pushed the Jag to its limit, cresting 140 kilometres an hour. All he could hear was the noise from the engine and Eva as she shouted, 'On the right!'

The SUV was just behind them. A truck was looming in front of them. They were about to be boxed in. Will's foot was on the floor; the accelerator had nothing left to give. The SUV hustled forwards, its black bonnet glistening under the tunnel lights.

*Not enough.*

Will pulled the Jag around the truck with millimetres to spare.

The SUV hit the back of the Jag. The shuddering movement thrust Will and Eva forwards, seatbelts straining against the collision. Will's hands tightened around the wheel as he struggled to keep the car on the road.

The truck whipped past them and Will had to swerve hard to avoid hitting a taxi. Its passengers stared dumbstruck as he hurtled past.

The SUV lurched forwards and touched the rear right panel of the Jag.

Eva was staring straight ahead.

The tunnel exit.

*Almost there.*

The SUV hit the Jag again. The car rocked and Will fought the wheel as it started to oversteer. A second thud as metal now caught on metal. Both cars were jammed together.

He slammed on the brake, hoping to tear them loose. The larger vehicle rammed them sideways, the concrete of the tunnel wall shredding the Jag's passenger side. Its windows burst, shattering glass throughout the car.

The Jag spun free from the SUV and turned side-on to the road, tyres stripping rubber.

They came to a violent, shuddering halt across the lane.

The SUV stopped 30 metres away. Its doors opened and the men stepped out.

'Eva?' Will's voice broke as he spoke. 'Eva, are you okay?'

She uncurled herself from the passenger seat, shaking shards of safety glass from her hair. She looked back up at him, bleeding from a cut in her forehead.

Will tried to shove the buckled car door. It didn't budge. Steel locked on steel.

'Eva, are you okay?'

'I think so. You?'

'Hard to tell. But I'm moving.'

The men were jogging now. Closing the distance.

From the road behind them the horns of stationary cars were blaring. The red warning lights of an accident in the tunnel flickered into life.

Eva pushed the door open and got unsteadily to her feet. Will clenched his jaw as he dragged himself through the shattered remnants of his side window. Pain shot through him as his stomach clenched around old wounds. It was as though razor wire had twisted down his torso.

He slipped as he stood. Oil and radiator fluid had flooded over the ground.

Will grabbed Eva by the hand and they started to run.

The men began to sprint.

Will had never seen anyone move so fast. Before they had even taken five steps the men were on them.

It took only seconds and his head smacked on the concrete. With blurred vision came memory loss – adrenaline and pain confusing the exact circumstances of his hitting the ground. All he knew was that dark eyes stared down at him through a black balaclava. The man was kneeling on Will's chest.

'Got your attention?' the man barked.

'Yes,' Will spat.

'Back off. This is your only warning.'

'Back off what?'

A latex-covered hand hit hard and flat across his face.

'Back off.'

'I don't know —'

The hand again. This time a fist.

Between the concrete and the blow Will didn't know what had happened. His eyes rolled back into his head. He'd been KO'ed in the boxing ring before but never like this. The back of his head felt as though it had been engulfed by the ground while the warmth of his own blood was now flooding across his face.

Turning his head sideways, Will saw Eva in the arms of the second man. He felt like broken lead.

Slowly and deliberately the other man dragged the blade of a knife down both of Eva's cheeks. At first it was as though nothing had happened but as the seconds passed, thin lines of deep red began to appear, giving way to a full flow.

Eva didn't scream. Not at first. Only when she touched her face and her hands came back glistening.

Both men turned and ran. Beneath the warning lights a crowd had gathered. They all watched as Eva's dress turned from yellow to red.