

# ONE

A strong breeze sliced through the air, forcing Will to push on harder as he walked home from his late shift. The night seemed darker than usual. A shiver crawled up his spine when he looked up and saw that many of the streetlights weren't working. It was winter in Sydney, and even with streetlights, the crisp evenings felt darker than the warm summer nights.

As he battled on, pulling his thick jacket up high around his neck, he made his way through the streets lined with small townhouses as fast as he could. He walked his usual route home, which took him far from the bright lights of the hospital where he worked, through to the quiet residential streets. The wind slapped his pale face, which was reddening as blood rushed to the surface, trying to keep him warm.

Ahead, Will heard yelling, swearing and the smashing of glass. He carefully looked up, hoping not to bring any attention to himself. Glancing in the direction of the noise, he saw two men and a woman. Teenagers in fact, no older than sixteen or seventeen. They were huddled together in front of a poorly-lit apartment building, wearing brightly-coloured jumpers and trackpants, smoking cigarettes and shoving each other, laughing loudly.

Will picked up his pace, head down, trying to avoid their gaze. The smashed glass looked like it'd once belonged to beer bottles. The teens must've already finished several, from the way they were yelling and stumbling around. Will preferred to avoid

strangers at the best of times, so he crossed the road and passed them as quickly as he could. Regardless if they were looking for trouble or not, he knew for a fact that he wasn't. He was tall, just a little over six feet, but scrawny, with spindly arms. He knew his best defence was to avoid any confrontation altogether, so he pressed on and kept his eyes fixed on the path in front of him.

As he passed the group, he felt himself relax. They hadn't even seemed to notice him, and remained on their side of the road, chatting amongst themselves. He felt pretty foolish for assuming kids hanging out on the street at night wanted to start trouble. After all, he was a teenager once, and even now at 27 years old, had never raised a fist at anyone. But then, he'd also never smoked a cigarette or drank in the streets. If he'd picked a fight in his youth, it wouldn't have ended in his favour.

A loud voice called behind him.

'Hey, you!'

It was one of the drunk teens. He flinched, his stomach flipping, but ignored the voice and kept walking.

The same voice called out again.

'Don't walk away from me. Come here, I just want a smoke.'

Will turned. The two boys were approaching him, while the girl sat in the gutter, drinking.

'I don't smoke,' he called back, trying to sound more confident than he was. He pulled his jacket tighter and kept walking.

'What did you say to me?' one said, as he caught up, coming uncomfortably close to Will. Neither of them was taller than him, but they were stocky, rugged, and very drunk.

'I said I don't smoke,' Will replied feebly. His hands shook, and he hid them in his pockets.

As he turned to leave, one of the teens, who had a flat, broad nose covered in freckles, moved directly in front of him. The stench of alcohol on his breath was putrid, and all Will wanted

to do was end the conversation as quickly as he could. The teen glared directly into Will's eyes, then gave him a cheeky smirk.

'You got any money for us to buy some, then?'

The other teen stood beside Will, grinning crookedly, showing yellow teeth behind thin lips.

'I don't, sorry.' Will looked down at his feet. His way forward was still blocked, and his heart was pounding. This situation was about to get really bad, really soon. 'Look, guys, I've had a long day at work. I don't have any money, or anything... but yeah, have a good night.'

Again, he tried to walk away, but the teens refused to back down.

'Don't lie to me,' the freckled teen said, still standing way too close to Will's face. 'You've got cash, I know it. Let's have some.'

A wave of panic hit Will and his throat clogged. Fight or flight was kicking in, but he knew flight was his strength. Would they catch him if he ran?

'No,' he managed.

Without warning, the freckled teen threw a clenched fist toward his face. It hit him straight in the nose. His head snapped backward, and he gasped as the hot sting of the punch took his breath away. Before he could react, the other charged into his back. Then he was on the ground, the two teens standing over him, kicking him as hard as they could.

Will lost count of the strikes. All he could do was curl into the foetal position and try to protect his vital body parts. Through the barrage of blows, he could hear laughter and taunts being hurled at him. Between two particularly brutal kicks to his ribcage, the freckled teen told the other to look through his pockets.

Blood pooled on the concrete. The pain was like nothing he had ever endured. Another hard punch collided with the side of his face, and dark dots appeared in his vision, as the bloodstained

concrete under his face began to fade out to blackness.

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The girl, who'd remained in the gutter, got up and approached her friends, zipping up her orange hoodie.

'Did you get some cash?' she asked, prodding Will's limp body with her foot.

'He didn't have any,' the freckled teen said.

'Alright, that's enough, then. Let's go. Someone's gonna hear us,' she called.

'Get out of here, then,' the thin-mouthed teen shouted back between kicks.

A terrace porch light turned on. The middle-aged resident ran out, holding a golf club.

'I've called the police! I'm sick of you kids carrying on.' He bounded toward the road, the club raised over his head. He was heavysset and muscular, charging toward them with his fists clenched.

'Then put the club down, and let's go, big guy,' the freckled teen said.

'Don't try that tough act on me,' he replied, charging onward. As he got nearer, he glimpsed the young man lying face-down, surrounded by his own blood. He'd heard the yelling, but didn't know a fight had broken out.

'Jesus,' he said. 'What have you done?' He dropped the club and ran over to Will's limp body.

'Come on, let's get out of here,' the girl said, tugging desperately on her friends' arms.

The three ran down the street until they were hidden by darkness. Kneeling, the man examined the mess before him. Will's face was so swollen and discoloured it looked as though he was in anaphylaxis. Although he'd regained slight consciousness,

he seemed close to losing it again. His breathing was laboured, gurgling with the blood that leaked into his mouth.

‘Stay still.’ The man cradled Will’s head, moving him into the recovery position. ‘It’ll be okay. We’ll get you to hospital.’

In the distance, sirens sounded.

## TWO

The ambulance sped into the City South Hospital's emergency driveway, meeting a waiting team of nurses. As they unloaded Will from the van, the paramedics helped wheel his stretcher inside.

'BP is 103/62 and dropping, heart rate 110. Looks like some internal bleeding,' one paramedic called out.

'He's in and out of consciousness, but breathing on his own,' said the other.

'Geez, Will, what happened? Let's get him stable quickly,' said Doctor Michelle Stone. 'You'll be okay – just hang on. Get him up to Trauma Bay One. I'm paging the team now.'

The nurses wheeled Will toward the trauma unit. Along the way, they refreshed his bandages, doing their best to keep his blood pressure steady and manage the bleeding.

Two police officers arrived just as Will was being brought into the ICU. Given the number of Friday and Saturday night assaults in the city, they were familiar with the hospital, along with most of the triage staff and their protocols. The first rule: walk and talk – fast.

Constable Maybury, a tall, broad-chested 21-year-old with a dark crew-cut hairstyle, tried to keep up with Doctor Stone. 'How is he?'

'He's in a pretty bad way. I just saw him half an hour ago, on his way out for the night. It's horrible this happened to him. Any

idea who did it, or why?’

She strode through the emergency department, tapping on a tablet. Both officers did their best to keep up.

‘Sounds like a bunch of kids jumped him, then took off when a neighbour chased them. We have a few officers out looking for them now. He was lucky the neighbour came out before it got much worse.’

‘Geez, poor Will.’ Doctor Stone shook her head. Looking down at Will’s injured face, she brushed his thick mop of dark messy hair away from his forehead, but quickly composed herself and returned to her professional persona.

‘Look, guys,’ she continued, ‘there’s no point in you waiting around here. Let us get him treated and stable. Judging by the look of things, he won’t be going anywhere soon. Maybe come back and try to speak with him later.’

‘Sure,’ Maybury replied. ‘Call us if anything changes. I imagine the detectives will call in tomorrow.’

By the time he finished, Doctor Stone was long gone, straight to the trauma ward to ensure Will was seen to immediately. She hoped the busy night would settle down, but for now, patients continued to pile in quicker than they could be attended to. She expected a rough night ahead.

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Rosie Kennedy’s phone woke her just after midnight. A junior doctor from the emergency room had been tasked with calling Will’s registered next of kin, and he knew from experience there was no benefit to beating around the bush. He gave Rosie the news efficiently but sympathetically. Through the horrified yelps on the other end of the phone, he related all the details and Will’s current status. As Rosie heard what happened to her little brother, panic surged through her entire body. She fired off questions quicker than the doctor could answer them.

‘What do you mean, attacked? Is he conscious? Oh, God, where is he now?’

The doctor tried his best to calm Rosie down by telling her that her brother was in capable hands, and in a stable condition. He resolved the call with good news: that Will would be moved out of the intensive care unit quicker than they’d expected.

Aside from her husband Ben and four-year-old daughter Claire, Will was Rosie’s only family. Their mother had passed away two years ago from chronic heart disease, and neither of them had seen their father since Will was a baby. Although Rosie had left the city years ago, she still looked out for him, and they spoke at least once a week.

Rosie crept into Claire’s room and kissed her softly on the forehead, before racing down the hall, grabbing her keys, and beginning the long drive toward City South Hospital.

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Will woke up in a hospital bed around 2 a.m. His head felt like it was ripping apart, and he was overcome by wave after wave of nausea. Every shallow breath he took was agonising. Despite never having broken a rib before, he knew at least one must’ve been cracked. At the end of the bed, a plastic bag contained what looked like his blood-stained hospital uniform. He held his breath as he tried to sit himself up a little more, but the thumping in his head told him to stay still.

Doctor Ravi Sandeep entered the room and went straight for the vital signs monitors. He wasn’t Will’s assigned doctor, but as soon as he’d heard about what happened, he’d taken the time out of his busy night to check up on him. Will groaned as he tried to lift his head, and Ravi hurried over to carefully press him back down onto the bed.

‘Will, It’s Ravi. Stay still. You’ve got a concussion, some pretty nasty bruising, and a couple of cracked ribs.’



‘Am I gonna be okay?’

Will gasped and clenched his teeth at how painful it was to string those five words together.

‘We’re waiting on the results from some scans, but things are looking good for now. Just sleep, okay? You need rest.’ Ravi placed a small device linked to a cable on Will’s stomach. ‘If the pain creeps up again, press this. It’ll give you some relief.’

As soon as Will added the liquid to the IV line, he was immediately pain-free, and fast asleep.

## THREE

Will had been working at the hospital from its beginning, so he'd become something of a reliable fixture around the place. That had earned him some respect as the go-to maintenance guy. During his tenure, he'd also developed a good friendship with Ravi, one of the younger doctors in the psychiatric unit. Aside from his older sister, Ravi was his only real friend. At first, Will had thought Ravi was just being polite when he'd invited him for lunch one day, but they'd gotten along well, and found they shared a common interest in online gaming.

Like Will, Ravi was tall, thin, and introverted. He wore thick glasses with black rims, which he would constantly adjust while he was speaking. He didn't wear scrubs or a lab coat. Rather, he wore a simple shirt, tie and trousers, and kept his hair in a crew cut.

As Will slept, Ravi made sure the nurses remained attentive to his monitors, and found time in his own busy schedule to stop by every hour to make sure his friend was recovering properly.

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As the morning sunlight filtered through cracks in the hospital curtains, Will woke in an unfamiliar room. He must've slept for several hours, but his body still ached. He lay awake, barely able to open his eyes, grateful for the painkillers sparing him more agony than his body could've managed. On the downside, they didn't seem to agree with his stomach. A wave of nausea followed every dose he received.

He remembered most of what happened leading up to his attack, and the first several punches and kicks. Everything after that, including his ride to the hospital, was hazy.

Will looked to his right and saw Rosie sitting by his bedside. Even though he was groggy from the painkillers, he could make out her thin body, long dark hair, and pointed nose. His slight movement made her spin and grab his hand.

‘Hey, it’s me. You’re okay. The doctors were in while you were still asleep – they told me what happened, but said you’ll be alright. They did some scans and couldn’t see any serious damage.’

Will slowly nodded and squeezed his sister’s hand.

‘I’m so happy you’re awake. Just stay still, everything will be alright.’ She gave a wide smile. He saw her eyes were bloodshot, and there was a tissue in her hand. He could only imagine how frightened she must’ve been.

A short time later, a nurse he didn’t recognise came in with a carton of juice.

‘Welcome back, Mr Denham. You had us all worried there for a while.’ She smiled as she got closer to his bed. ‘Here, try to have some juice. A doctor will be in soon to check up on you.’ She checked the monitors, before quietly leaving the room.

With some help from Rosie, Will managed a couple of hands-free sips. While he lay there in silence, he remembered the terror from last night, and it seemed to replicate itself again. Although he knew he’d be safe while at the hospital, his body still trembled. He felt more frightened than ever.

Slowly, he tried to look at the bag of bloody clothes still hanging off the end of his bed. The kids had probably emptied his pockets, but he wanted to see what may have been left behind. Looking to his side, he saw his phone on the bedside table, and although the screen was cracked, he was relieved to know they hadn’t taken it. He found out the hard way that sitting up still

wasn't possible, as his insides clenched, his chest tightening around his aching ribs. He groaned and fell back into the bed. Dizzy from the movement and the medications, he vomited all over his hospital gown.

The nurse rushed back into the room.

'You've got to stay still, I mean it,' she said. 'You won't be doing yourself any favours by moving about.' She tutted at Will as she began gently wiping down his chest and gown.

'Sorry,' he replied, face red.

'Don't worry about it. It's my job.'

'I'm just trying to make sense of what happened,' Will said. He attempted to take control of the clean-up, but the nurse brushed him away.

'Now, I just spoke to some detectives,' she said. 'They want to come and talk to you later, if you can remember what happened, and the doctor says it's okay.'

'I know what happened. I just want to know why.'

The nurse ignored him and packed up the soiled towels before walking toward the door. She was probably the stereotypical busy, no-nonsense nurse. Overworked and underpaid.

Just as she reached the door, she turned back to Will. Her body language shifted, and she appeared a little softer.

'I'm sorry this happened to you,' she said.

'What's your name?' Will asked. 'I haven't seen you before.'

'Jenny. I just transferred here a couple of weeks ago.'

'Thanks for looking after me,' he said, as he tried to smile.

'No problem. I heard you work in maintenance here.' She moved back into the room and straightened up Will's blanket.

'Yeah. Speaking of maintenance, can you do me a favour?'

Jenny shook her head and raised a hand. 'Don't worry. Your

team's heard about what happened.'

'No, not that. My uniform.' Will pointed to the blood-soaked clothes still in sight at the end of his bed. 'Can you just throw that out? I don't want to look at it.'

'Of course. Now get some rest.' She looked over at Rosie. 'Make sure he doesn't move too much.'

For the next couple of hours, Will drifted in and out of a broken sleep, plagued by horrific nightmares. First, he dreamt of explosions happening throughout City South Hospital. The dream became more vivid as he explored the wards and corridors, wearing only the hospital gown he'd fallen asleep in. As he crept through the wrecked building, his ears filled with a high-pitched ringing. Though he was afraid, he had no control over his legs. They continued to drive him through the seemingly endless hallways, toward the centre of the hospital. The air was heavy with sulphur and concrete dust, which waited to settle on the crushed ground.

The last thing he remembered was entering a large patient ward, to see a mass of charred bodies. He woke up quickly, in a full-body sweat, struggling to catch his breath. He stared at the ceiling, trying to forget what he'd seen.

When his body finally shut down again, he dreamt he was in a dirty, poorly-lit garage, standing at a wooden workbench. The bench was scattered with metal parts, and he was holding a thin yellow wire. He unscrewed the metal cap of a small tube, pushed the wire inside, and felt its tip reach something spongy. A digital display on the workbench lit up with the word *Active*. He removed the wire from the tubing, and the display switched off.

His dream shifted. Suddenly, he was back in the ward, surrounded by wreckage and death. The room was frighteningly quiet. All the beds were empty, but looked like they'd been slept in. He began searching the rest of the ward, desperate to locate any survivors. As he turned down a hallway, he was confronted

by a tunnel of fire, creeping toward him. Shrapnel was propelled by the flames as they filled the hallway. The combustion was occurring in slow motion, but Will was trapped. His legs refused to work, and he had no way to protect himself. He watched as the massive fireball moved closer to him. Just as he was about to be engulfed, he woke in another full-body sweat.

The dreams had felt so real. As he tried to relax his body and slow his breathing, the pain in his head and body crept back.

‘Are you okay?’ Rosie asked. ‘You’ve been groaning and moving around for a while now.’

‘Yeah,’ he replied groggily. ‘Bad dreams.’ He fumbled for his painkiller switch and pressed the button, injecting himself with sweet relief.

Will spent the rest of the morning between broken naps and intense pain. Later in the day, a doctor in dark-blue scrubs under a white coat entered the room.

‘How are you feeling?’

Like Will, Doctor Stone had worked at the hospital since it opened. She was a tall, middle-aged woman, with tan skin and brown hair tied in a small ponytail that just touched her lab coat. They’d crossed paths many times, but never had a reason to speak before.

‘I feel like a train’s hit me. And I’m pretty dizzy.’

‘That’d be the concussion. You took some nasty hits, but you got here quickly. You have two cracked ribs, a broken nose, and some bruising, but I’m glad to say you’ll be okay. The bleeding stopped faster than we expected. We’ll keep you on the antibiotics as a precaution, though your cuts and grazes are clean, and I don’t expect any infection now.’

Doctor Stone glanced over the IV line and the monitors. She returned to the end of Will’s bed and crossed her arms.

‘Do you remember what happened?’

‘Yeah, I do. But it happened so quickly. A bunch of kids jumped me after asking for a cigarette.’

‘Well, after a couple of days’ rest here, you’ll be okay to go,’ she said.

She listened to Will’s chest, felt his arms, shoulders, and neck, then made notes on a tablet.

‘There are police officers outside, who want to talk to you. Are you happy to chat with them?’

Will nodded and Doctor Stone left the room to call them in.

After trying his best to sit up a little more, he lost the fight with his body. He gave up, and settled for raising his head. Moments later, two smartly-dressed detectives entered the room. One was an athletic woman in her late twenties, attractive in fitted charcoal pants and a loose white blouse. Her blonde hair was tied back in a tight bun, with not one loose strand visible. Her skin was pale and smooth, and her wide smile showed a set of perfectly straight teeth. The male detective who followed her was older, maybe forty. He was at least six feet tall, with a broad chest and wearing a well-fitted navy suit. Will had never met any actual detectives before, but thought those two were good-looking enough to play police on TV.

‘Hi, Will. I’m Detective Senior Constable Woods, and this is Detective Senior Constable Lapis,’ the female officer said, with a soft smile. She looked at Rosie, who stood next to Will’s bed. ‘You mind if we have a chat alone?’

‘I think it’s best if I stay here,’ Rosie said sternly.

‘It’s okay, I’ll be fine. Maybe get yourself a coffee,’ Will said, waving her away.

She nodded, and looked both detectives up and down.

‘I’ll be back soon,’ she said, as she left the room. Woods closed the door behind her.

‘So, how are you feeling?’ Woods asked.

‘Terrible,’ Will replied. ‘It’s the worst headache I’ve ever had.’

‘It must have been a nasty attack. That’s why we’re here – we want to find out who did this to you,’ Woods said. ‘Are you able to run us through everything that happened?’

‘Sure.’ Will tried again to sit more upright. He recounted the entire event without interruption from either detective. They took notes, listened attentively, and paid him exceptional courtesy. Once he’d told them everything he could remember, they asked clarifying questions, and honed in on a detailed description of the attackers.

When they’d finished their questions, they thanked Will and packed up their notes.

‘Listen,’ Woods said, ‘I’ve been around long enough to see too many of these attacks. You need to take care of yourself.’

‘Yeah. They have me on meds, and I’m bandaged up. Should only be a couple of days here,’ Will replied.

‘That’s not what I meant.’

She handed him two business cards. One was her own, with her contact information at the Surry Hills Detectives Office. The second was a victim’s information card.

‘You should check these people out. It’s a victim support group – you can go to a meeting, or they can put you in touch with a psychologist. It helps, trust me.’

‘Sure, thanks,’ Will said. By the sincere look on her face, he knew she meant every word.

‘Well, we have your information, and will be in touch soon with any updates on the case,’ Woods said.

Once both detectives had left, Will examined the first card. Aubrey Woods – Detective Senior Constable. It listed her phone number, station details, and email. The second card read Pitt Street Victim Support Group – United in Strength, and had a phone number and website. He placed it on the side table, before



drifting back to sleep.

When he woke in the early hours of the afternoon, Rosie had returned to the chair beside his bed.

‘You must be tired,’ he said, noticing the bags under her eyes.

‘Don’t worry about me.’ She shrugged, stretching her back. ‘You’re the one who needs the rest.’

‘I’ll be okay here. I’m not going anywhere tonight, anyway – why don’t you stay at my place tonight? You can’t get a decent sleep in a chair.’

‘Might be a good idea... that way, you can be stuck with me for longer after I’ve had a good sleep.’

‘Take the keys from that bag there,’ he said, pointing toward the end of the bed. ‘The nurses told me the kids didn’t take them.’

Rosie gave Will a kiss on the forehead.

‘I’ll give Ben a call, and let him know you’re okay.’

‘Great, thanks. I’ll talk to him soon myself. Don’t trash my place, please.’

‘If it’s anything like the last time I was there, you’ve already done that yourself. I’ll be back soon. Don’t go anywhere.’

Will smiled. It really meant a lot to him she’d made the trip to be there. It was also refreshing that she’d felt comfortable enough to relax a little and try to cheer him up, after she’d known he’d make a full recovery. Once she’d left, he stared up at the white ceiling, battling with his headache until he fell asleep.

The dreams continued. Will found himself in his hospital bed, alone. This time, however, there was no death, no wreckage. He walked through the deserted, silent hospital, the only noise the sound of his bare feet slapping against the cold floor. As he approached the exit, his whole body tightened. He tried to leave through the sliding glass doors, but his legs wouldn’t allow it. Continuing past the exit, he made his way to the back of the

hospital, to see if he could leave by the rear loading dock. He could hear a faint ticking noise, which got louder the further he went. When he could see the loading dock entrance at the end of a long corridor, the ticking became louder. He reached to open the door, and as his palm touched it, an explosion forced him to the ground. Debris and smoke surrounded him. As though time was drifting slowly, the ceiling and walls started to collapse. Just before he was buried under the rubble, he woke up with his head aching.

Even in his sleep, he was frightened. He hoped he could stay awake.