



A Will Trent
short story

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Contents

Title Page

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Extract from *Unseen*

Extract from *Criminal*

Copyright

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Karin Slaughter

Will Trent let out a long, mournful sigh as he stared at the blinking red light on the frozen Coke machine. There was no telling how long the Coke and ice had to cycle before a delicious frozen beverage came out. Will had an app on his phone that showed the location of every Icee machine in Georgia. This was the twenty-first century. It was bad enough they weren't flying around in jetpacks. Was it too much to expect a real-time update on a frozen Coke?

He glanced around the Lil' Dixie Gas-n-Go, taking in the neon signs that advertised live bait, ammo, and lottery tickets. Will was in Forest Park, less than half an hour's drive from downtown Atlanta, but the gas station had all the makings of a country store. Day-old biscuits baked under a heat lamp. A gallon jar of pickled pigs' feet sat next to the cash register. A plexiglass display for smokeless tobacco filled an entire wall. Except for the frozen Coke, Will was hard-pressed to come up with a reason anybody would want to be here.

He wasn't just thinking about the store. Forest Park was a dog of a city, sitting on the edge of Clayton County, which was arguably one of the worst counties in the state. The usual suspects had led to its demise - bad real estate deals, corrupt county officials, the shuttering of a major military base - but the final nail in the coffin had been the 1996 Olympics. In the name of progress, Atlanta had razed all of its government housing projects and sent the occupants south so that international guests and athletes wouldn't have to gaze upon the poor and disenfranchised.

After the Games were gone, no one was asked to return. For Atlanta, out of sight meant out of mind or, in the case of the thousands who were forcibly relocated, out of luck. Very little monies or resources were spent on helping them settle. Gang members set up shop. Crime rates soared. Neighborhoods were decimated as anyone who could afford to fled to other counties. The pillaging didn't stop with the usual bad guys. In the intervening years, rampant corruption and mismanagement had touched just about every governing body. The Clayton County school system had lost its national accreditation. The county chief of police was being investigated by the state for theft of grant money. A commissioner had been billed by one local paper as "often investigated, never indicted." The county's finance office and archives had been served with enough search warrants to wallpaper the governor's mansion.

And none of that accounted for the glaring injustice of the slow-moving wheels in the Lil' Dixie frozen Coke machine.

Will took his cell phone out of his pocket and checked the time. He'd wasted six minutes waiting for the machine to cycle. He already knew he was an idiot for waiting so long. The question was, would he be a bigger idiot if he cut his losses and left?

Five more minutes.

He tucked the phone back into his pocket and walked up the aisle. The girl behind the register eyed him suspiciously. She had good reason to. Will usually wore a three-piece suit to work, an outfit he'd been told made him look more like an undertaker than an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, which he'd been for over a decade. Today was his first day undercover for a new assignment. He was wearing shitkicker boots, torn jeans, and a flannel shirt that was too tight across his shoulders. The only thing missing from his con attire was a tattoo, but there were some sacrifices Will was not willing to make.

He had always liked working undercover, liked the idea of being a different person, walking around in a different skin. Of course, that was before he'd met Sara Linton. The prospect of being someone else had lost some of its appeal now that he had a steady girlfriend. Will liked exactly who he was right now. He liked the man he saw reflected in Sara's eyes. He especially liked the way she'd woken him up with her mouth this morning, which was exactly how Will wanted to wake up every day for the rest of his life.

The bell over the door clanged. A fireplug of a cop sauntered into the store, his eyes scanning back and forth like a gun turret. The man's leather belt creaked as he walked, his gun, mace, baton, and handcuffs beating their own symphony against his body. His black shoes snicked on the floor. His dark blue uniform with its yellow stripe appeared to be from the bumblebee line of law enforcement attire. The pants were ironed into a sharp crease. The Forest Park Police Department badge on his chest was shined to a mirror polish.

Will knew the guy's type without even thinking about it – the way he swiveled his sunglasses around to the back of his head, the bulging arms that were more fat than muscle, the air of Axe body wash that chewed into the oxygen around him. He was the type of hard-ass who would play fair so long as you understood that he was in charge. The minute he thought otherwise, you'd hear the hounds of hell barking in your ears.

Today must've been a good day. The cop winked at the girl behind the counter as he grabbed the key to the bathroom. He'd clocked Will the minute he'd walked through the door, but he pretended like he hadn't right up until it was time to pass by. Will narrowed his eyes, mindful that he was undercover. His fake identity had him as a con named Bill Black, and there wasn't a con on earth who didn't hate the sight of a cop. If not for a sense of decorum, Will would've spit on the floor.

The cop looked up at Will, his neck cracking because Will had a good ten inches on him. "That your bike out there?"

Will didn't answer. The Indian Chief Dark Horse came courtesy of the Fulton County impound lot. The motorcycle's warbonnet headaddress tank design and black matte spoke wheels had cost a high-rolling drug dealer a chunk of change. It gave Will some pleasure knowing the high roller was currently serving ten to fifteen in Valdosta State Prison while his shit-hot bike was parked in front of the Lil' Dixie. The license plate was registered to Bill Black. The cop would've pulled up Black's sheet on his computer before he entered the store. Assault. Battery. Attempted robbery. Suspected in a string of crimes from here to Kentucky. And perhaps most heinous of all - speeding in a school zone.

The cop asked, "I need to worry about you, hoss?"

Will guessed Bill Black wouldn't have much to say to a cop. He would also know it was perfectly legal to remain silent. Instead of answering, Will looked at the magazines on the rack. Porn, mostly, and *People* magazine, which was basically porn for women.

"All right," the cop said. "If that's how you wanna play it." He glared another second or two before heading off toward the bathroom.

Will checked the girl at the counter again. She had seen the exchange and was looking at him differently now. Very early on in his life, Will had learned that there was a certain kind of woman who was attracted to trouble. He guessed the girl behind the counter was this kind of woman. At least it seemed like it when she took out her lip gloss and seductively traced the wand around her wet lips.

Which made Will think of Sara this morning.

Which made him think he needed something to distract himself.

He made sure the Icee machine's light was still flashing, then randomly picked up one of the magazines. The paper was thin, and he realized he'd chosen *Busted*, a weekly

newspaper that compiled all the mugshots taken by the local police. It was like a celebration of incarceration, with centerfolds, ads for bail bondsmen, and explanations for the alphabet of charges: DUI, PUI, PMDD, DGCSA.

Obviously, some arrestees had cottoned to the fact that their mugshots might be viewed by a wider audience. The centerfold for this particular issue was a female meth freak with her head thrown back so the camera could better capture her toothless grin. Underneath her face was a smattering of capital letters that Will didn't bother to decipher.

He returned the paper to the rack and headed toward the back of the store. The flashing red light was flashing at a slower pace. Will wondered if that meant the mixture was close to ready, or if he was trapped in some sort of Icee-fugue state where time had ceased to matter.

He thought to ask the girl, but she had stopped making googly eyes at him and was staring blankly at the wall. Her body was draped across the counter in a visual display of boredom. Will guessed she hadn't noticed that a truck had pulled up outside. It was an older model Chevy with nothing but Bondo and a spotty primer coat holding it together – the kind you saw in the movies that indicated the guy who drove it was either an old-timer who smoked a pipe or a young man who had resisted the call of the city and was choosing to work the land.

The truck idled. Smoke curled from its tailpipe. There was a man behind the wheel, but he didn't get out.

The bathroom door slammed open. Will had to breathe through his mouth. Axe body wash was no longer the predominant odor. The cop tossed the bathroom key up and down in his hand, calling to the girl, "You might not wanna go in there for a few." He was smiling when he looked at Will, but there was a warning in his eyes. Will held contact for a few seconds longer than necessary before turning back to the Icee machine.

The red light was off.

Will tried to pretend that his heart hadn't just skipped a beat. The idling truck was a distant memory; let the cop deal with it. Will was a con named Bill Black who liked to partake of the occasional frozen drink.

He grabbed a cup and snapped on a plastic dome. He lined up the hole in the dome with the spout for the machine. He wrapped his fingers around the handle, pausing a split second before pulling back and allowing the rush of frozen Coke to fill the cup.

And then something odd happened.

The cup was on the floor. The plastic dome topped a pile of frozen Coke like something out of a Stephen King novel. Will's hand was empty, but his fingers were still curved like he was gripping the cup. His other hand held open the nozzle. A slush pile slopped over the tip of his boot. There was a high-pitched whine, then a sharp pain like a needle piercing his eardrum.

His brain quickly went into rewind. Somewhere in his visual cortex, Will saw the cup lift off the floor, the frozen drink slush back in, the dome snap back onto the top. At the end, Will was holding the cup again, about to pull back on the handle.

That was when he'd first heard the gunshot. It was an explosion that shook the air like a rocket taking off.

Two seconds had passed, tops, but it felt like minutes.

Will's knee went to the floor – automatic, just like he'd been trained. *Get yourself low and little.* His hand went to his side, but of course his gun wasn't there. He was undercover. Cons weren't allowed to carry weapons, and Bill Black was a law-abiding con.

"Give me the fucking money!" a man screamed. His voice trilled up, like he was more scared than anybody else. "Hurry!"

Cautiously, Will peered around the row of magazines. The girl was shoving money into a plastic bag as quickly as she

could. The offending weapon was pointed at her head. Shotgun. Winchester Model 24, double-barrel, side-by-side boxlock action. The man holding it was African American, maybe forty, forty-five years old, roughly five-eight and 180 pounds. He had a bushy porn mustache and a spotty goatee. He looked straggly, more homeless guy than holdup man. He was wearing dirty jeans and a matching denim jacket with dark stains on the sleeves. Dreadlocks stuck out from underneath a John Deere baseball cap.

Will took out his cell phone. He dialed 911.

"All of it!" the gunman screamed. The tip of the shotgun wavered from his shaking hands. "Hurry!"

Will pressed the cell phone to his ear, willing the operator to pick up. He looked for the cop. The man was on the floor. His Glock was inches from his fingers. He'd obviously tried to draw down on the robber and gotten a bullet for his effort. Blood pooled around him. His sunglasses had skidded across the floor. One of the lenses was broken in two. The gunman's heel crunched on the plastic as he stepped back. Sixth sense. He was wondering who else was in the store.

Will heard a loud click in his ear. The emergency operator sounded as bored as they usually did. "Nine-one-one. What's your—"

"Who's there?" the gunman yelled. He turned toward the back of the store, took one step, then another. "Who is it?"

Will put the cell phone on the floor as he duck-walked toward the next aisle.

"Who are you?" There was something different about the gunman's tone. Will looked up, his eyes finding the fish-eye mirror in the corner. He could see the gunman, which meant the gunman could see him.

Slowly, Will raised his hands. He tried to sound like a con. "I got no beef with you, man."

"I need to worry about you?"

The words were eerily similar to the cop's.

“No.” Will glanced down at his phone, hoping like hell the 911 operator was listening. “Lookit, bro, we’re cool. You ain’t the first guy to rob a gas station.”

The shotgun was raised, but the man didn’t come closer.

Will pressed his luck. “Don’t worry about me. Just take the money, jump back on 75 and get the hell outta here.” Will had to swallow so he could keep talking. “Police ask me, I’ll tell them you took the back roads.”

There was a moment that felt a lot like contemplation. Will didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath until he saw the gunman shake his head once, then turn back to the girl at the cash register.

Apparently, the gunman wasn’t pleased with her lack of progress. “I said hurry, you stupid bitch!”

“I’m doin’ it!” she yelled back. Will chanced another look. She stuffed one last handful of cash into the bag before shoving it toward the robber. “That’s it! That’s all I got!”

The gunman snatched the bag out of the girl’s hand. Relief seemed to flood his body. His teeth showed under the mustache. He gave a rebel yell as he raised the shotgun and pulled back on the trigger, which was a very dramatic way to make an exit, but a stupid thing to do if you wanted to get away.

Double-barrel shotgun. Two triggers. Two shots. Unless he broke the action and reloaded, the gunman might as well be holding a hollow metal stick.

Will stood up.

“Jesus Christ!” the gunman screamed, obviously startled.

Will started walking toward him.

“What are you doing?”

Will told the girl, “Go out the back.”

“I thought we were cool!” the man yelled, his voice cracking. “Stop right there!”

Will didn’t stop.

The man leveled the shotgun from his waist. “I’ll shoot you.”

Will kept walking. The girl was frozen in place, so he made his voice harder. "Move."

She finally did as she was told, bolting for the back door.

"Stop!" The man shook the gun at Will. "I mean it! Stop!"

Will still didn't stop.

The gunman pulled on the first trigger, then the second one. The empty clicks reverberated through the store. "Shit!"

Will grabbed the shotgun. The hot barrels singed his skin. He jammed the butt of the gun into the man's chest so hard that he could feel the sternum give. The man stumbled back against the plate glass window. His arms flew out. His eyes went wide. There was a clinking sound. The glass started to crack, white lines shooting out like bolts of lightning.

The man's forehead broke out in blood - at least that's what it seemed like. Will felt the air stir as a bullet whistled past him. Bone and gray matter spattered his face, the front of his shirt. The gunman had been shot from behind. The bullet went through the glass, through his head, and almost straight into Will.

Instinct.

Will's knee hit the floor. His hands went over his head like they could magically stop a bullet.

The idling Chevy.

The get-away vehicle.

The driver stood outside the open door to the truck. He started shooting wildly into the store. Bullets zinged off the floor, ricocheted into the snack displays.

Will reached for the Glock. The cop's hand snaked out and grabbed it before Will could. Even flat on his back, he wouldn't give up his weapon. Another bullet whizzed past Will's shoulder. There was no time for reasoning. Since Will couldn't grab the Glock, he grabbed the bag of cash. He ran down the aisle, hiding behind the end cap as linoleum tiles splintered behind him.