



"Seeker takes the best of Anne Rice and Stephen Donaldson and combines it into a slow-burn, deep and surprisingly rich novel."
- Anne Brooke, Vulpes Libris

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Cover by Damien May

*'A man can surely do what he wills to do,
But cannot determine what he wills.'*

Arthur Schopenhauer

Kurt couldn't give a good reason as to why the paperwork was missing, and refused to admit that he deleted the original document, despite Ste going into extreme detail on how it was clearly removed on purpose. Willem got lost on that technical stuff, but Ste knew his shit and it was clear from the look of anger in Kurt's eyes that he'd been found out. Ultimately Willem decided to suspend Kurt on full pay while the matter was investigated further, and pointed out that external investigators were being called in, since he no longer felt he could deal with this impartially.

Kurt had stormed out, putting up a front of arrogance, claiming they could investigate all they wanted since he had nothing to hide. Although his colourful language indicated he knew he was screwed and could probably be done for theft and possibly fraud, since somewhere along the way wages had been lost and yet clearly paid out to someone.

A tense atmosphere was left in his wake, and although Ste attempted to lighten it with a few gags, Willem just wanted out. But he knew that he couldn't go anywhere, since he had some paperwork to fill in before heading downstairs to run the shift. The only other person who could do so was at the hospital with her daughter, and so he was stuck on shift until half five.

'Maybe you need to give Charlie a ding?' Ste suggested.

'Why?' Willem said. Well, snapped. He knew he was snapping, but couldn't really help himself. 'I can deal with things without consulting my boyfriend.'

'Hmm.' Ste chewed his bottom lip, his raised-eyebrow look never wavering. 'Yes, I got that after years of seeing Mr Businessman here. But I was more thinking that perhaps you need to chill out a bit, and talking to your fella might do that for you.'

'You know what, Stephen, I don't need your advice. I'm the boss, you're the employee, let's keep it that way, yeah?'

'Sure,' Ste said, and calmly stood up. He gathered his things together, all the while making sure he didn't look at Willem. Once he reached the door, he looked back. 'When you've worked out what's actually bothering you, you'll know where to find me. Later.'

Once the door was shut and Willem was alone, he slammed his fist on the table. 'Fuck!'

For a while he sat there, looking at the closed door, his mind racing through all the things that were ticking him off. As usual the business with his sister was up near the top; like a constant itch he couldn't reach, her situation bugged him. Kurt's own activities also kicked him in the teeth. Never before in his professional life had something seemed so personal to him. And now he was in an odd position with Ste. They'd always got on well, never been especially close, but the way he had snapped at Ste was totally out of order. The guy had helped him out with the Kurt problem, and had, apropos of nothing, helped him get his head around his relationship with Charlie. Maybe Ste had overstepped the bounds slightly with his advice on Willem's personal life, but he couldn't deny that Ste was spot on.

He really was buckling.

Ste had also been right about the temporary fix. Later, when things had calmed down, Willem would call Ste and apologise for being a jerk to him. But right now he had another call to make.

As he speed-dialled Charlie's number, he glanced up at the clock on the wall. Charlie was in work, but hopefully he was on a break.

'Hey, lover boy, you all right?'

Upon hearing Charlie's light voice Willem decided that, yes, he was indeed all right. Now.

The short chat with Charlie did the trick, leaving Willem in an effervescent mood that carried him nicely through the following shift. He quite enjoyed the actual work, interacting with the customers. It had been a while since he'd done some proper hands-on work at his shops, so it was nice to just chat and talk about coffee instead of looking at figures and planning for a new shop in a busy train station.

Of course, being the big boss did come with a few cons, in particular an edginess to the staff, who acted in a very stilted manner for the first hour or two, while he sought ways to convince them that he wasn't there to watch them and that they really should act as if he was just another of the guys. Eventually the message did get through, and he finally saw the real world according to the staff of Coffee @ Town's End. And he liked what he saw.

The staff were great at their jobs, always friendly and welcoming to the customers, but clownish in equal measure behind the scenes. It was a work ethic he wholly approved of; if work wasn't fun then there really was no point to it.

The good vibes stayed with him as he travelled to his mother's, and he refused to allow her husband to bring him down. He had already decided that he would invite Jake over for the evening; it had been a long time since they'd pulled an all-nighter, and now was as good a time as any, plus it was time for him to tell Jake all about Charlie. And he had just the way into the conversation.

En route to his mother's he tried calling Ste, but the line was dead. Not put off, once he pulled up outside his mother's house, Willem sent Ste a text apologising for his unforgiveable snappiness earlier.

Picking up Curtis was relatively painless, and formal. Barely a word was passed between Willem and Eon; technically his step-dad, Willem never thought of Eon as anything but his mother's husband. As ever the looks of ill-concealed disgust levelled at him went unnoticed by his mother. She kindly left him in the living room, while she went about getting Curtis' stuff together; the idea of actually having it all ready in time for Curtis to be picked up clearly did not occur to her. Instead she'd rather spend her energies bitching about being dumped on by Lawrencina and how it played havoc with her night.

'You could have said no,' Willem pointed out.

His mother rolled her eyes at that idea, and Willem had to hide a smile. Yes, Ren was definitely her daughter. 'No, I couldn't, Billy, and you know why.'

'Right, just like you know I hate that name.'

At that, his mother ignored him. A symptom of a bigger problem in his family. The bloody-mindedness of the women, refusing to compromise or change their views on anything.

The whole reason Lawrencina had absconded to Manchester five years ago was because of a flaming row she'd had with their mother, who had forbade her to do something or other, but it was just another example of two people so alike that all they could do was butt-heads. And ever since Ren had come back his mother had almost bent over backwards to accommodate her in fear that she might up and leave again at the first sign of resistance.

As his mother continued to busy herself, Willem chose to wander up the stairs to where Curtis was playing. The boy didn't hear Willem approach, so he stood at the doorway for a short while, as Curtis played with his little cars. Watching his nephew transported him back almost thirty years, and he saw himself in the very same room with Jake playing with Matchbox cars. Willem had had a bucket full of random cars, way more than any kid really needed, and was often getting in

trouble for laying them out all the way down the stairs. Willem smiled at the memory.

It was a happy home back then, just him and his parents, almost a decade before the big divorce came along after his mother's affair with Eon Adomako was discovered and his dad was kicked out of his own house.

Various other small events followed, key moments in Willem's life marked by abrupt changes that sent his dad to the arms of Jesus, and led to the birth of his sister in 1990, by which time Eon had already moved into the house and made it his home. Willem had to suffer a few excruciating years before he was able to move into a student flat when he started college.

It was in moments like this, as he was dragged back to easier times, that he wondered how his life would have differed if he'd not gone to college. Would he be in Jake's place now? Going from job to job, coasting through life, but always having fun and rarely being left alone. Would he have stayed at home, been there for Lawrencía from her birth, found a middle ground of understanding with the man who became his step-dad? He didn't know.

He'd read lots of literature on the more esoteric beliefs and sometimes thought his life would have turned out the way it did regardless of his choices as a teen. Events would have conspired against him to make him the man he was. But for that moment he lost himself in the thought that maybe, just maybe, it was not too late to change the man he had become.

'Uncle Billy!'

Willem snapped out of his private place and came crashing back to reality as a bundle of child ran into his legs. The only person he didn't mind calling him Billy – it was a child's name, not that of a responsible adult. So having a child use the name was okay. Willem reached down and scooped Curtis up.

'Hey, buddy, how you doing?'

'I fine. Grampy buyed me new car.'

'Did he? Wow, which one?' Willem asked, returning Curtis to the floor. The kid scrambled over to his pile of cars and picked out the shiny new one. 'That's brilliant! What car is it?'

'Blue one,' Curtis said, as if that was obvious. And indeed it was blue, but usually Curtis gave his cars names. Clearly the shiny blue one didn't deserve a name, maybe because Grampy bought it, Willem thought ruthlessly.

'Right, then, shall we put these away? You're coming to Uncle Billy's tonight.'

Curtis lowered his head. 'Mummy and Daddy left me,' he said quietly, his solemn voice reaching right in and pulling the biggest heartstring it could find.

Willem swallowed hard, and knelled down beside his nephew. 'I'm always here for you, buddy. Uncle Billy will never leave you.'

For a moment Curtis didn't look up, instead he continued to look at the car in his hand. Then he dropped the car, looked up and smiled the most rewarding smile Willem had ever seen.

'Come here,' he said, and took Curtis in his arms. 'I love you.'

'How much?' Curtis' muffled voice asked.

Willem released Curtis and threw his arms as far apart as he was able. 'This much!'

'That big much. I love you this much in the whole world,' Curtis said, also throwing his chubby arms out wide.

Willem grinned, wishing all love was so easy to find.