



"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

The insistent banging soon roused him from his sleep, the echo of a dream still befuddling his reasoning. For a moment, Willem wondered where he was; but with a growing feeling of disappointment he realised he was no longer in the arms of his lover. This brief down feeling soon turned to annoyance, when he opened his eyes and found himself lying on his couch, topless, his jeans only half buttoned. For a few moments more he didn't move. He just looked up at the high artexed ceiling, abstractly thinking that he really needed to sort it out; artex was so done, it looked lame and reminded him too much of old folks long gone.

It had been a nice dream. He'd met up with Charlie, and enjoyed the most amazing time. They had gone to a show, followed by a lovely meal in a swanky restaurant, talked loads, kissed even more, and ended back in Charlie's bed, and...

Willem scowled, feeling the hardness in his shorts, pushing tight against jeans misaligned by an uncomfortable night of sleep on the couch.

Still the banging continued.

With a groan he forced himself to a sitting position, wondering who the hell would be knocking at his door so early in the morning and so damn incessantly. One name popped straight into his head.

Lawrencia.

Only his sister would think her problems were so important that they couldn't wait until a godlier hour before trying to find some kind of resolution. And worse, that it was a resolution that only Willem could help with. Like he actually gave a crap.

He stood, adjusted himself, now that he was able to finally do so, straightened his jeans and looked around for his belt. Both the belt and his top were on the chair, so he stumbled over to get them. His laptop was still open, although it had powered down at some point during the night. Willem didn't remember actually ending the Skype chat with Charlie, so he could only assume that one of them had said goodbye. He hoped he hadn't fallen asleep on Charlie, because that would be tantamount to relationship suicide, especially this early in. He certainly didn't think he'd done so, and the crunched cans lying beside the laptop gave him good reason as to why he failed to recall the closing moments.

He grinned as he did his buttons up and fed the belt through the hooks of his jeans; the conversation had certainly heated up last night, that much he did

remember, but by that point he had been on his fourth can, and after that... Well, he had no idea. He had never been a big drinker; the odd glass of wine when he settled down to a DVD, maybe a can or two when he was entertaining.

And now he had a headache to confirm it his status as a lightweight drinker. The knocking on the door didn't help.

'Yeah, yeah, I'm coming, dammit,' he mumbled to himself and clipped the buckle of his belt. He picked up his top.

The blast of cold air as he opened the front door caught him full on his naked chest. He stepped back abruptly, almost closing the door on his sister's face accidentally. She glared at him, but continued on in regardless.

'Morning to you, too,' said her retreating form. 'Looks like you could do with a brew.'

Willem remained by the still open door, and blinked. She wasn't wrong; coffee was definitely needed. Only black this time. He had an important meeting later in the day and attending in a hungover state was not a good idea. He shivered as the cold air hit him once again, and closed the door.

'Mum's right, you're not eating properly, are you?' Ren asked as Willem entered the kitchen.

He looked down at his naked torso. Okay, so he was quite thin, but he was hardly malnourished or anything. And besides, his muscles, although never going to win him any competitions, looked quite sexy. Charlie said so.

'Right, and suddenly mother's grown a conscience?' he asked, pulling his top over his head.

Ren looked away at the question, choosing to focus her attention on the making of coffee. But before she did, Willem noticed the haughty rolling of the eyes. It wasn't just the standard 'whatever you say' eye rolling, it was full on 'get over yourself' rolling. Very few people had mastered that little piece of body language as successfully as his mother, but in that moment Ren had it, and for a split-second Willem saw his mother as a twenty-one-year-old woman. Ren may have had her father's dark skin, but she had inherited everything else of their mother.

'You and mum really need to sort this shit out, Billy, it's not good for either of you.'

'Yeah, can't see it happening any time soon.'

‘When are you going to forgive her?’ Ren asked over the crashing sound of the water from the tap.

‘I don’t know,’ Willem said coolly. ‘When are you going to stop taking advantage of her guilt?’

The conversation died there, while Ren finished making the coffees. Willem didn’t want to start his day like this, already he was irritable about being woken up so sharply, and having Ren lecturing him was too much. If she continued he knew that it would lead to a few choice words from him about the whole Jimmy fiasco, and he could not be arsed with it at the moment. So, instead, he allowed the frosty air to melt a little, and grabbed the milk from the fridge. He told her he was having it black this morning, and there followed a short exchange about late nights and the best hangover cures each knew. Spookily his little sister seemed to know more about hangovers than he did, but then he reckoned the best part of five years with Jimmy was enough cause to warrant more hangovers than his own life did.

‘Where’s Curtis?’ he asked, cringing at the sharp bite of the coffee on his taste buds.

‘At Mum’s. Me and Jimmy have to go up to Manchester; he’s got some business to sort out.’ Ren at least had the decency to look away as she said that, which cushioned the blow a little. Willem knew exactly what kind of business Jimmy was engaged in, and there was never anything even remotely legitimate about it. ‘Thing is, Mum can only have Curtis for the day, she’s off to bingo tonight, so I was going to ask if you could keep him here for the night?’

‘I do have work early tomorrow,’ Willem pointed out, knowing full well he wasn’t going to say no, but curious to see what kind of excuse his sister was going to ply him with today.

‘I should be back by then.’

Willem was surprised. No excuse translated into him taking Curtis to their mother’s before work, since there was no way in hell Ren would be back early. He didn’t doubt that she believed her reason for going with Jimmy was simply to make sure the twat didn’t do anything too bad, but Willem also knew that once there, in the company of Jimmy’s mates, Ren’s own judgment would wane and she’d soon be doped up like the rest of them.

As much as he hated the whole situation, he was glad she had enough sense to not take Curtis into it, too.

‘Okay, fine. Tell Mother I’ll pop over to pick him up about six. Probably won’t be able to get out of work any earlier than that since I’m likely going to end up on shift, depending on how things go with Kurt.’

Ren looked up from her coffee, and Willem immediately knew she was not going to enquire about his problems at work. When she was a kid Ren had always been interested in what her big brother did, but then came the big blowout with her parents and the absconding to Manchester and Jimmy. He still hadn’t got to the bottom of what had happened in those three years away, but since she’d been back her interest in the life of Willem was relegated to how much she could get out of him, and using his place as a dumping ground for Curtis whenever the kid became an inconvenience.

‘Can’t you tell her? We’re leaving as soon as I...’

Willem looked down the hallway to the front door, all good feeling for his sister melting away. ‘He’s out there, ain’t he?’

‘Yeah.’

Willem took a deep breath, itching to go outside and do some violence. Jimmy and he didn’t often come into contact, and as far as Willem was concerned it was probably for the best. He’d tried to help Jimmy a lot when he’d first come onto the scene, but all Jimmy had done was take Willem for a ride and threw it all back in his face. There was no love lost between the two of them.

‘So, how much then?’

Ren was caught off guard, and Willem felt a glow of satisfaction, thinking that Ste would have been proud of his segue then.

‘Money. You could have texted all this across while you were half way to Manchester, so you obviously knocked me up this early because you’re after cash. So how much?’

‘Erm,’ Ren said, engaging her puppy dog look, but it was such an old trick that Willem wondered how long before she realised it didn’t actually work on him anymore. ‘Well, we need petrol to get up to Manchester, and will probably need to stop off on the way for some food, and...’

Whatever Ren said after that Willem didn’t hear. He honestly didn’t care; all he felt was disgust. Bad enough that he was woken so damn early, but that he was now essentially paying Jimmy to go and do some illegal deal up in Manchester... His mind couldn’t really bear to hear any more of Ren’s shit.

So he just walked back into the lounge and got his wallet off the mantle. Ren followed him into the room, and he handed her a couple of fifties.

She smiled at him. 'Thanks, Billy, we'll sort you out as soon as we get back.'

Willem just grunted, not trusting himself to speak.

'Okay, got to go, see you tomorrow.' Ren pecked him on the cheek and left the room. Before she disappeared out of sight she glanced over at Willem, and the look in her eyes said it all.

She knew she was fucking up again, but she felt trapped and could see no way out. Willem would almost have called the look pleading, and although he knew he really ought to call her on it, he just turned away and stared at his reflection in the mirror hanging above the mantle.

The sound of the front door closing came a few seconds later, once Ren realised she wasn't going to get any other kind of help from her brother, and was shortly followed by the revving of whatever vehicle Jimmy had jacked to get them to Manchester.

'Weak-assed cock-sucking bitch,' Willem hissed at the mirror. And it seemed as if, for a second, his reflection glared back at him accusingly.

'Good night, then?' Ste asked, trying to navigate his way across the now crowded office.

Willem looked up from trying to re-arrange the seating; the small office really wasn't designed for any decent meetings. With one table, two chairs and a couple of filing cabinets, it was pretty much crowded. Trying to fit in two more chairs was proving quite a task. He managed to squeeze a third chair in so far, with a fourth still sitting in the hallway outside, waiting its turn to be compressed.

He was glad that Ste had agreed to attend the meeting. Truth was, if Ste had refused, as was his right, Willem would have found someone else to stand in as a witness, but he preferred it to be Ste.

'It actually was,' Willem said, in answer to Ste's question. 'What I remember of it.'

'Sweet,' Ste said, grinning like the proverbial feline from Cheshire. 'A few cans and a webcam, what could possibly go wrong?'

Willem raised an eyebrow at that. For some reason he felt like he was back in school, coming in with stories of his first sexual conquest and being egged on by the most promiscuous in the class. Only he never did share stories of sexual

conquests in school, mainly because he never had any. Knuckling down and getting the best grades was all he cared about back then. Now, he reflected, perhaps Jake had been right, he'd missed a big chunk of the whole teen bonding experience.

'Your laryngitis seems to have cleared up some,' he pointed out.

Ste shrugged, and placed his glass of water on the table. 'Quick healer, mate. My body hasn't become dependent on drugs to get better. Good immune system,' he said, and coughed. 'Still, not completely gone,' he added with a grimace.

'So I see.'

Ste sat down and started leafing through the sheets of paper that were on the desk. 'What's next, then?'

'Well,' Willem began, giving up on even considering a fourth chair, 'I want you to take notes, make sure we get everything said down. Don't want to slip up on this. I'm still finding it hard to believe that Kurt would try to scam me like this. And yet the evidence...'

'...Pretty much says string the idiot up by the short and curlies,' Ste said, all trace of humour gone. 'And haven't you learned from last night that people often step out of character?'

Willem thought back to last night on Skype, and nodded. Yep, that was definitely new for him. 'Maybe, but there are character types that people usually fall into, read about it on net. Let me see; melancholy, sanguine... erm...'

Ste nodded slowly at this. 'Right,' he said, even slower. 'And we all know that the internet is bastion of expert opinions. Only, you know, not. People are not like characters in a book, dude, you can't define them so easily, slotting them into particular personality types. People shift and change their attitudes, their desires, everything, all they need is the right... incentive.'

There was a distant smile on Ste's face as he said this, but Willem wasn't sure he wanted to know the why of that. Instead he kept his tone light.

'You really are the insightful professor of life, aren't you, Mr Krueger?'

'What can I say, Will, I'm multi-talented. And, you know, there's plenty going on in my world you'd not believe even if I did tell you. Not unless you experienced it yourself.'

Willem narrowed his eyes. 'Is that an invite?'

'Don't know, mate, wouldn't be up to me. I'd have to ask Robin.'

'Right, the mysterious Robin Turner. Anyway, what did you say the other day about your mixer menu?'

‘True that.’ Ste nodded, lips pursed in thought. His face broke out into a wide grin. ‘Maybe I’ll have to speak to Robin. I know he wants to meet you.’

‘You two talked about me?’ That was a surprise. Probably shouldn’t have been; after all, Ste spoke of Robin to Willem.

A dark shadow passed across Ste’s features, but an instant later it was gone. Willem wondered what that was about, but he didn’t get the chance to ask, as Ste leaned forwards and asked, ‘Anyhow, I meant what’s next with you and Charlie?’

‘Oh. Him.’ Willem waved a hand as if Charlie was the last thing on his mind. Ste was clearly not convinced by this attempt at indifference, so Willem sat down in the chair he’d prepared for Kurt. ‘Gonna meet up with him this weekend.’

‘Ah.’ Ste sat back and steepled his fingers, with a smile on his lips.

‘Ah what?’

‘Nothing, just glad to see you’re doing something about this. Been a long time.’

Willem nodded. He couldn’t argue with that, really. ‘It has. Not since...’ He shook his head. ‘Wow. Jacen. Now there’s a name I haven’t really thought about in a long time.’

And it really had been a long while, Willem realised; a good three years in fact. Jacen and Willem hadn’t worked out too well, obviously since they were no longer dating, mostly because Jacen couldn’t deal with Willem’s commitment to his work. Jacen wanted to go off and do stuff, experience the world a little, and he wouldn’t have it when Willem tried to explain they’d have plenty of time for that later when they were financially secure. Jacen had quickly found someone else; quite an adventurous guy from what Willem had since heard.

‘I wonder where he is now?’

‘Probably off doing what you should have done a long time ago, Will,’ Ste said, and let out a gentle cough.

‘Still not too sure, though,’ Willem said, wondering what it was about Ste that made him want to open up so freely. ‘I mean, Ren’s fucked off again and I’m stuck with Curtis tonight. Not that I mind, since I love spending time with him, obviously, and better him being with me than around Jimmy, but what happens when I’m away? She can’t just knock on my door whenever, then.’

‘So?’ Ste held his hands up to ward off the words that were about to erupt from Willem’s mouth. ‘Seriously, it’s not your problem. You have your own life, and every once in a while you need to remember that.’

‘That’s a selfish attitude there, Ste.’

‘Probably, but as Whoopi Goldberg once said, once in a while you need to give yourself permission to be selfish. You can’t carry everyone all the time. Eventually you’ll buckle. And I hate to break this to you, Will, but you’ve been buckling for a while now.’

Willem let out a breath of air. The truth coming from Ste was too much, and he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to hear it anymore. If this had been Jake, then perhaps it would be different, since Jake had been there forever, but Ste, as much as Willem liked him, was still the kid he’d hired back in ‘96. Hearing such personal observations was breaking a wall that Willem didn’t think ought to be broken. Yet at the same time he knew he couldn’t talk to Jake about any of this; even now he could hear Jake’s response, and Willem wasn’t ready to be slated by Jake for finding love.

Whoa. Willem turned away from Ste, no longer able to take the inquisitive looks, and wondered where that had come from.

Love. That was a big admission, but was it actually true? Is that really what he was feeling?

The answers to such questions had to be put aside, because at that moment there was a knock on the office door. Kurt had arrived.