



"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

'Has it really been fourteen years?' Ste asked, as he manoeuvred the mouse around the computer, opening file after file, locating backdoors.

Willem was slightly envious, mindful of the countless times his own hand lost control of the mouse and accidentally closed documents without saving them, and here was Ste moving the cursor around like it was part of his own body, so much so that quite often he'd look away from the monitor while chatting to Willem and still the cursor would click on the exact thing he'd been looking for. Damn him and his skill.

'And almost five months. Yup, come September we'll be celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the opening of the first Coffee @ Town's End shop.'

'Can't believe I've known you that long.'

'And still I know so little about you.'

'You know how it is, dude, social life and business not on my menus of mixers. Way it's always been.'

Willem glanced down at his mobile which he was cradling in his hands; he was due a text off Charlie any moment. 'Ever since you were a spotty sixteen-year-old. You were crap with the ladies back then, too,' he added, repeating a very old joke.

'Look who's talking, matey.'

'I'm gay, what's your excuse?' Willem raised his eyebrows, and Ste let out a snort of derision. And then a throaty cough. Willem chuckled. He'd lost count how many times they'd been through that routine, although usually Ste wasn't ill. 'Be careful with that, I can't afford to catch it.'

'Laryngitis ain't contagious, fool,' Ste said, looking back at the monitor. 'Come on, baby, work for me.' Willem glanced over Ste's shoulder at the little box that had appeared on the screen. A green line was increasing at the centre of the box. Willem wasn't too sure what it meant, but he knew enough to know it was doing something positive. 'So, what, you off somewhere interesting?'

Willem blinked, blindsided by the abrupt question. 'Huh?'

'Well, you don't want to get laryngitis, so I'm assuming you've got something planned that would not be so cool if you developed an inflamed larynx. Now...' Ste paused, clicking the mouse once, and turned triumphantly to Willem. 'Got it!'

On the screen an Excel document opened, displaying the pay information Willem needed to sort out the mess Kurt had made. 'Brilliant. I owe you one.'

'I know, that's why you're coming back to Ken High Street with me. Also, for the record, you might want to seriously have a word with Kurt. Sure, I know I don't like him, so you can read this as slightly biased, but there is no way that document would have been so embedded in the hard drive unless it was intentionally put there.'

Willem frowned. 'Not even accidentally?'

'No chance. Looks to me like he thought he'd removed the file permanently, but alas, or fortunately for you, nothing is ever totally deleted off a hard drive. You just need to know where to look.'

'Okay, that's slightly worrying.'

Ste coughed, and reached for the glass of water he'd brought up to the office with him. 'I'd say so.'

Willem looked to the floor, his eyes following the pattern of the rug. Disappointment was a nice way to put how he felt. He trusted the people who worked for him, and in over fourteen years of business he had never had any cause to discipline a single one of them. Now, that it should be one of his shop managers...

'Can you sit in on the meeting? Take notes. I want to make sure that there are no misunderstandings here.' He looked up from the rug, and the expression on Ste's thin face was as serious as Willem had ever seen.

'That I can do.'

'Cheers.'

'When's Kurt in next?'

'Tomorrow. Is tomorrow good for you?'

Ste gave this some thought. 'Okay, tomorrow is cool. But I'd suggest not ringing Kurt, rather just lay it on him tomorrow. If he's up to some big scam he might decide to leg it, rather than face the music.'

Willem hadn't considered this. Despite the big let down over the deleted document, his mind was still on its default setting; trust your employees, think the best of them and they'll think the best of themselves. 'You really think he'd do that?'

The look in Ste's blue eyes was enough of a response for Willem. 'Also, I'd suggest you let him bring a witness in, too. Need to do this by the book, just in case things get nasty.'

'Shit,' Willem said, taking a deep breath. If things did indeed get nasty, he saw all kinds of possibilities. Police, courts. It could go on for a while. He just didn't understand why someone would do something like... He stopped himself. Like what? He didn't even know what Kurt had done yet. 'Can we send this file across to the Kensington office, then we can crunch these figures and your audit at the same time?'

'Yeah. It's called email. You know the one; you're the net junkie here.'

Willem made a face at Ste. 'Well, yeah obviously we can email it across, but I just thought...'

Ste fought to hold back a laugh. 'You're really off your game today. Something to do with the call you're expecting?'

'Call? What call?'

Ste pointed at the mobile still being cupped by Willem. 'The one you keep looking at your phone expecting.' For a moment Willem felt like a kid caught out doing something particularly naughty, but Ste unknowingly gave him the perfect get out. 'You waiting to hear about the new shop?'

Willem smiled, hopefully in a convincing manner. 'Anytime now.' It wasn't a straight out lie, after all he was waiting to hear from Network Rail who were going to tell him if he got the lease on the unit at King's Cross Station. Getting a unit in one of London's biggest train stations would be the crowning achievement at this point in his career, since it tended to only be the big chains that got hold of those units. Select Service Partners was the biggest competition, with their various brands taking up most of the train station units in the country, everything from Upper Crust to Marks & Spencer. But if he could get a Coffee @ Town's End in a station; the potential revenue and exposure would set him on the road to becoming a proper chain, to the point where he could eventually form big business partnerships. But, of course, that wasn't the call he was waiting on, not that he was actually waiting on a call per se...

'Gonna be big potatoes,' Ste said, echoing the thoughts rushing through Willem's head. 'At this rate you're gonna need an area manager.'

'Angling for a promotion?'

‘You know it makes sense,’ Ste pointed out with a smile, which didn’t waver when he added, ‘so who you really waiting to hear from? You’ve got a glow about you, and it’s not one I’ve ever seen you with before. Not even when you were with that... Thingy? Oh, what was his name?’

Willem swallowed hard. ‘How’d you mean?’

Ste raised an eyebrow. ‘What’s his name? This new bloke, I mean.’

‘Charlie.’ The name popped out suddenly, and it left Willem with a sense of relief. It was as if he’d been holding his breath for weeks, and was only now able to breathe again. He grinned, no longer wanting to keep the news to himself. ‘Email that document across, and then I’ll fill you in on the way to High Street Ken.’

‘You’re not freaking out on me,’ Willem pointed out, unsure whether to be disappointed or not.

There hadn’t been much to tell, really, and it barely covered the five-minute journey up North End Road to the Talgarth Road junction. They were waiting at the traffic lights, the old Three Kings pub on their right, with its green doors constantly open as people entered and exited for the ever-important cigarette. Not that Willem frequented pubs very often, but making public places smoke free was the best ruling the government had made in recent years as far as he was concerned.

The walk from his place to the North End Road shop was only ten minutes on a good day, so it seemed pointless to take his car, which meant he was now stuck in Ste’s little ‘02 VW Lupo, his legs struggling to fit beneath the dashboard. It wasn’t that Willem was tall especially, but the passenger seat had got jammed one day after it had been moved forward to make space for one of Ste’s larger friends.

‘Why should I? Way I see it is that it’s no different to being pen-pals, and many a romance has started out with two people being pen-pals,’ Ste said, and hissed his frustration at the still-red traffic lights. ‘I swear they stay red here longer than anywhere else in London.’

Ste had a point about the pen-pals thing, and it was quite an enlightened view Willem decided. Not a view he suspected many others would hold to.

‘They only stay red to piss you off,’ Willem said. ‘Either that or they’re just helping you put off the audit.’

‘Good thinking there, Sherlock.’ Ste leaned forwards and placed his palms together, looking up at the lights in mock-piety. ‘Stay red, stay red.’ It was good to see that Ste wasn’t allowing the laryngitis to get in the way of his natural good humour. ‘To be honest, though, isn’t that the whole point of those chat room things? To hook up with people, make a connection? After all, for people like you, there has to be some way to meet new people in some meaningful way.’

Willem wasn’t too sure he liked the ‘people like you’ remark, but he conceded the point on account of the fact that Ste was actually making him feel better and less guilty. Although he still wasn’t sure what there was to feel guilty about, but nonetheless that unmistakable feeling was very much present. ‘It doesn’t help that chat rooms are mostly filled by weird people who are out to get laid, who have the social graces of pigs, and can’t spell for toffee. Which is actually kind of depressing in and of itself.’

‘Really? See, I don’t get that, you’d think with all this written communication, peoples’ spelling would improve, not get worse. God, is that shop still there?’

‘Huh?’ Not for the first time Willem was caught off guard by Ste’s habit of segueing from one thing to another.

He was looking across the junction where North End Road continued on its way to Kensington High Street, at a small convenience store.

‘Touch of Class; they’ve been there forever I’m sure. Remember them being there when I was in school.’

‘Wasn’t that long ago.’

‘Wonder if the Khans still run the place?’

‘Want to pop in and find out?’

Ste looked at Willem like he was some mentally deficient child. ‘Like they’d remember me? Anyway, green is go!’

And so it was. Ste released the handbrake and the car went on its way.

Willem didn’t like the Lupo, it was what he liked to call a lazy car. He preferred to be in complete control when he was driving, and the point of an automatic was lost on him. As they passed the store, Ste glanced at it quickly. The look of nostalgia was one Willem understood all too well, he’d been feeling it himself often enough the last couple of weeks.

‘Charlie wants me to go to Southend to spend a few days with him,’ he said suddenly.

It was one of those things he wanted to lay on the table between him and Jake, but he was having the hardest time even broaching the subject of Charlie with Jake. Talking to Ste was so much easier for some reason. A notion that Willem would never have thought possible.

‘Cool,’ Ste said just as quickly. ‘You going to go?’

Good question. Willem wanted to, that much was certain, but how could he just up and leave everything? His job, his family, his sister... The idea of being away for a few days and not being on hand to help out with Curtis did not sit well with him at all, and then there was Jake. In almost thirty years they’d barely been apart, saw each other almost every day. ‘Don’t know. Should I?’

‘Dude, if you need to ask that question then damn right you do. I don’t think you’ve ever taken a holiday in all the time I’ve known you. Bet you never had a day off school, either, did you?’

Willem opened his mouth to refute that, but found he couldn’t. ‘Well, no, I didn’t. Someone had to achieve something in my family, and it was pretty clear it wasn’t going to be anybody else. The only thing my dad has achieved is a closeness with drink and God, and look at my mother and sister...’

‘Even more reason to go. You put way too much on yourself, Will, always have as far as I can see. You’ve got no social life to speak of, other than having a few people over now and again for wine and fun on the Wii, a family that use you like a hole in the wall, and you keep Jake hanging around like a sick puppy.’

Willem narrowed his eyes, and looked over at Ste. ‘Since when did you get all insightful?’

‘Since always. I’ve known you for a decade and a half, dude, and unlike me, you’re an open book. Listen, you do what you want to do, but seriously, doing something unexpected will probably do you well. You think I’m this reliable and good at my job because my private life is full of boring shit? Nope, always out there doing things that people would never expect of a responsible manager-type.’ Ste winked at Willem in a conspiratorial way that sent a shiver of excitement up his spine. ‘Go, man, totally throw everything for a curve ball.’

Willem wasn’t too sure how to respond to that, and was therefore quite relieved when his phone vibrated in his hand. He flipped it open and read the message from Charlie, asking him if he’d decided on whether he was coming or not.

Willem looked at Ste who was apparently fully focused on driving up Kensington High Street, taking in the sights of all the shops and people as if they were brand new. Right, like he wasn't egging Willem on in his silence.

Willem grinned. Fuck it, Ste was right.

Need to arrange a time soon, he typed into his phone and hit the send button.

