



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

Arthur Schopenhauer

He glanced at his phone again, just in case, but there were no further messages, so he placed it on the table and looked at the paperwork before him. Not that his mind was totally focusing on the job at hand.

Charlie was busy at work, which, in theory, gave Willem a chance to catch up on some things that needed doing. He was, once again, in the office of the ever-troublesome shop on North End Road. He was beginning to get a little concerned with Kurt, the store manager, who seemed to have a knack for misplacing important paperwork, especially that which related to staff wages. Several complaints about being underpaid had reached his ears.

Before him, on the desk was a hard copy of the rota for the last four weeks, amended to include sick days, overtime, and so on. It was a point of procedure in Coffee @ Town's End that the rotas be planned a month in advance, so that all the staff could organise their social lives accordingly. He could only imagine the havoc endlessly altered rotas would play with the lives of his staff, and his theory was that if he kept his staff happy then he'd get the best out of them while at work. It was a theory proven time and time again, and he was proud to say that his shops probably had the lowest staff turnaround of any coffee shop in London; far lower than the big chains for sure.

The office computer was on. He sought to locate the file that told him who had been paid what on Friday. There should have been a hard copy of the document in the drawer alongside the staff rota for the last four weeks, but *nada*. And so Willem had turned his attention to the computer, wherein he ought to have been able to find the original file. He really didn't want to ask everyone to bring in their payslips, because that would be a nuisance, but he was seeing little choice since the staff wages records seemed to be nowhere on the system.

Unless... He needed some help, from the one person who understood the system better than he did. Stephen Krueger, the manager of the Kensington High Street shop. Willem reached for the phone, and pressed the quick dial button. Within seconds the phone was answered, and a young woman's voice said, 'Good morning, Coffee at Town's End, how can I help you?'

Willem smiled to himself. 'Hi, is this Shannon?'

A momentary pause at the other end. 'Erm, yeah it is,' she replied, her professional voice forgotten for a moment. 'Who's this?'

‘It’s Willem. Is Stephen there?’

‘He is, Mister Townsend,’ Shannon said, switching to the consummate professional in a heartbeat. ‘If you could just hold a moment, I’ll get him.’

‘Cheers,’ Willem said, always preferring to keep his dealings with the staff light. He couldn’t stand all the bowing and scraping one got in a lot of big chains. Regardless of their jobs, or their positions in the companies, people were still people and ought to be treated equally. Unfortunately, his staff just couldn’t get that, but nonetheless he remained casual with them in the hope that one day they’d respond in kind.

It wasn’t long before Ste picked up the line and said hello. His voice was unusually husky.

‘All right, Ste, what’s up? Not sounding your usual self there. Too much extreme sporting on the weekend with Robin?’ he asked, mentioning the only person from Ste’s private life that he knew of.

He’d never met Robin, but Willem had heard Ste mention him a lot over the last eight years, usually in relation to the high-risk sports that Ste seemed to enjoy so much.

‘I wish. Nah, ain’t seen Robin in a while.’

‘Ah, so what’s up?’

‘Laryngitis, my doctor says.’

‘Nasty.’

‘Yeah, pretty much, but I’ll deal. What...?’ Ste stopped as a fit of coughing erupted over the phone. Willem was glad they hadn’t invented more interactive phones yet; otherwise he expected his face would be covered in mucus by now. ‘Sorry,’ Ste said, his voice sounding even more strained. ‘What can I do you for?’

The laryngitis was obviously getting to Ste more than he liked to admit, since normally any phone call between them lasted a good ten minutes before they even thought to talk business. The banter was a key role in their relationship and it had always been so. Even now he could still remember the cocksure sixteen-year-old he had first employed back in ‘96 when he opened the very first coffee shop, not that Willem had been much older at the time.

‘Don’t worry about it, Ste, you sound awful. Why you even at work? Surely Carolina can come in and run the shift?’

‘She is. I’m in the office; audit day. Trying to rest my voice, drink lots of water; all that jazz. Doc says I only got Acute Laryngitis and it should pass in a few days.’

‘Don’t sound that cute to me, fella.’

This got Ste laughing; although by the sound of it he wouldn’t be thanking Willem any time soon. Still, laughter was good for the soul, especially when ill. Even if it was an old joke.

‘So, now you got me talking anyway, to what do I owe the honour?’

‘There’s been some kind of cock up with the wages and I’m trying to find the records on the computer, but *nada!*’

‘Don’t tell me, Kurt at North End, yeah?’

Willem didn’t answer; instead he just waited for the inevitable comment.

‘Told you he was shit. Worst mistake you ever made when you promoted him.’

Willem agreed, *now*, but at the time he was convinced Kurt was right for the job. He knew the coffee shop business so well, but Kurt was a prime example that a good supervisor did not necessarily mean good manager material. Still, one bad business move in fifteen years wasn’t a major issue. A bit of corrective coaching should solve the problem. Well, maybe more than a *bit...*

‘Uh huh, you have pointed this out on occasion. *Anyway*, Kurt screwed up and now I can’t find the records to check against the rotas. I’m assuming it’s still on the computer system, but you know me, never could get me head around this damn system. That’s why I have a you.’

Willem could just imagine Ste rolling his eyes, and yet at the same time falling for the bit of flattery.

‘Okay, I’ll come over and find the file for you. Anything to stick it to Kurt, but...’

‘Yeah, go on, knew there’d be a but somewhere.’

‘*But,*’ Ste went on pointedly, ‘you gotta come back here later and help me with this damn audit.’

As butts went, Willem didn’t mind that one. He was always up for crunching some figures. Still, one final little jab wouldn’t hurt.

‘And there was me thinking I was your boss.’

Willem took a little pleasure in the painful laugh that spurted on the other end of the line as he ended the call.

He sat back in his chair with a satisfied smirk.

‘Cheers, doll,’ Mike said to Marge, the big lady who worked at The Greasy Spoon, as she placed the plate of bacon and eggs on the table before him.

Marge didn't smile. Her grumpiness was almost patented. 'Only doll I've ever been, is one of those Russian dolls,' she said, laughed sweetly, and returned to making more greasy food for the cafe customers.

Mike watched her go, then turned to Jake. 'I don't get it; somehow I don't see Marge in a furry hat.'

Jake smacked him upside the head. 'I can see why you're a labourer, Mikey, you're as thick as pig shit. You must have seen those Russian dolls? Every time you open one there's a smaller one inside, until you get to one no bigger than your dick.'

Mike frowned at Jake's effrontery. 'Man, you're so funny. And this from the man who couldn't satisfy a Lilliputian with his.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Jake said with a wink. 'Amy hasn't complained yet.'

'Which is shocking in itself.'

The Greasy Spoon was their usual haunt for breakfast at the start of the week, making sure their bodies were full of cholesterol before returning to the building site. More often than not Mikey and he ended up working the whole week together, but once in a while they found themselves at opposite ends of London, and that was why their Monday morning binge of full English breakfast and several cups of tea was essential. Catch up time for the weekend.

For Jake, though, there was a bigger reason than simply a mate's round-up. He loved Will, no doubt about it, and would do anything for him, but when it came to being all laddish and talking about the things most guys talked about – the latest shag, football, and generally acting like oafs for a bit – Will was just no good at those things. Jake didn't think it was totally due to his sexual orientation, a lot of it was simply just because of the person that Will was, low on fun and high on responsibility. Jake would have given anything to have Will along on one of the lads' nights out, but Will and his lambic beers would be so out of place that it'd become embarrassing.

'How long before you move on, then?' Mike asked. 'Two months has to be a record.'

Jake shrugged. 'Dunno, mate, things are going pretty well with Amy. See how long before I get bored.'

'Give you another week tops. I know you, Jacob, me old mucker, and your little fella gets bored with dipping into the same pot for too long.' Mike stuffed his mouth with half a slice of toast, and chewed. 'You know,' he said, bits of toasted

bread spitting out onto his plate, 'you could always try Willem. There's a hole you've not explored.'

'Fuck off, man! I got nothing against Will being gay, but he doesn't think of me that way. And, anyway, you're more his type.'

Mike baulked at this, but he couldn't deny it. When not in his scruffy work clothes and hardhat, Mike was something of a metrosexual; a pretty boy who preened himself in front of a mirror for a good hour before going out, every hair in perfect place, and smelling like a tart's handbag. Judging on the few boyfriends Will had had over the years, Jake could easily see Will and Mikey together. Will liked them younger, too, and at twenty-eight Mike fitted the bill nicely.

'Don't know, mate,' Mike said. 'Wouldn't want to get between the unspoken thing you two have going on. You're pretty tight.'

'Well, d'uh, I've known him almost my whole life. And, you know, he doesn't really have the fun bags to hold on to.' Jake mimed groping a woman's breasts, an act that almost made Mike choke. A cleared throat sounded behind them and Jake turned around. Marge was giving him a look that told him to tone it down.

'Ah, come on, tell me your husband don't like playing with those bags?'

Marge shook her head, and unconsciously nudged her rather ample breasts, instantly giving Jake a mental image of *Cissie & Ada*. 'You'll be lucky to find someone like me.'

Jake nodded in mock seriousness. 'True, so give me your number and I'll give you a call when I've tried out the rest of London.'

'Okay, hush it now, stallion.'

Jake winked and turned back to Mike, who was shaking his head. 'What?'

'You'll try anyone once, won't you?'

'Sure, why not? All I ask is that she's female and free of disease.'

'Mate, you're gonna have to settle down one day,' Mike said, fingering his wedding ring.

Jake scoffed. 'Never going to happen, man, and if it does, it'll have to be with someone pretty special.'

'And that's not Amy?'

Jake knew Mike was ribbing him, but it was a loaded question. Two months was a long time for him, and their relationship was only getting better. Still, settling down...? Jake wasn't sure he'd ever be ready for that.