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# **FIFTY SHADES OF RECKONING**

A story by Christopher Bunn

"I've left the file in the usual place."

The broker's voice sounded flat and distorted on the phone. The encryption stripped out any trace of personality. It compressed humanity until the sound on the phone was only a lifeless collection of metallic noise that happened to be words.

"The client is willing to pay double your fee."

"I'll call you back," said the man.

He put the phone down and stood at the window. The city lights gleamed in the darkness. From his apartment on the thirtieth floor, the scene was beautiful. Like a mirror reflecting a starry night. A thousand tiny lights scattered in the darkness. But he didn't see the beauty. He only saw the darkness.

His name was Jack Ferris. At least, that was his current name.

His image wavered in the window pane, dimly lit by the lamp on his desk. A lean man of middling height. A gaunt face topped with brown hair going prematurely grey. He was an unremarkable man, a forgettable man, until you looked closer at his eyes. They were brown, but so dark as to be almost black, and there was a bleak, remote silence in them.

He sat down at the desk. There was nothing on it except the lamp, a laptop computer, a pen, a small pad of paper, and the phone. The phone was a burner, of course. He changed phones every three days. It was excessive, even as far as his line of work went, but he knew it had saved his life at least once. Perhaps twice.

He opened the laptop.

The image on the screen was a painting of a spiral staircase. The original painting was in one of his storage lockups in Boston. He had stolen the painting years ago from an old mansion, high in the hills above lake Geneva. It had been a cold December night. He had been on a job. The painting had been hanging at the top of a staircase. He had stared, transfixed. The artist's perspective looked straight down from the top of the staircase. The resulting whorl of diminishing steps and polished bannister railing was a perfect spiral, receding away until it vanished at its point in the shadowed well of the bottom of the staircase. The mahogany bannister, in the painting and in real life, was carved with flowers, their petals opening out, each ring increasing in number. Five petals, eight petals, thirteen petals, twenty-one petals. Fibonacci numbers. Ferris was not a thief by trade or casual inclination, but he took the painting after he finished the job that night.

Ferris logged onto a gaming forum and clicked on the inbox of his character. The Fourth Horseman. He had chosen the name in a rare fit of humor. The inbox was full of the usual messages from spam-bots, advertisements for armor upgrades and requests to join battle teams. He opened the drafts folder. There was only one draft inside. It held a file labeled Multiplayer Tactics. He read it. Looked at the photos. Frowned. And then read it again, slower this time.

He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Yes?" said the broker.

"I read it," said Ferris.

"And?"

"I'm not taking the money."

"What?" The broker was startled, but the encryption masked the depth of his surprise.

"I'll do it for free," Ferris said.

"But my..."

"Don't worry. You don't have to tell the client. You can have your cut. I don't

care what you do with the rest. Donate it. Burn it.”

“Very well,” said the broker.

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The next morning, Ferris called the Bulgarian. The hacker picked up on the sixth ring.

“I need some details,” said Ferris.

“I’m busy,” said the Bulgarian. “You know what time it is here? I have a guest.”

“Double your rate.”

“She’s very beautiful.”

“Triple.”

“She’s leaving now.”

Ferris switched to code. It probably wasn’t necessary, but it never hurt to be redundant. The software encrypting the line was far beyond the NSA’s cracking capabilities. A package originally coded in Taiwan and then modified in Israel by a Talpiot programmer who owed Ferris more than money could ever repay. Even the Bulgarian had been impressed by the encryption, and he was an arrogant bastard.

“This guy, I’ve heard of him,” said the Bulgarian when Ferris was through.

“There’s gonna be, how you say, consequences.”

“That’s my problem.”

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A week later, Ferris flew into Seattle. He used a false set of papers: driver’s license, credit cards, business cards, even a well-worn library card. The odds were good that the identity would not be necessary, but only fools ignored the small statistical possibilities that some day, one day, a detective might be able to weave together the disparate strands of a hotel clerk’s memory, a second of footage from a security camera, the recollection of a waitress with a good memory for faces. Improbable, but possible. You could never be entirely certain.

Life usually confined itself to a predictable array of probabilities, but sometimes improbabilities occurred. They violated the norm. Ferris wasn’t sure if it was because of random chance or a pattern that he could not detect. A hidden pattern. Concealed in the ticking of clocks, in the vast, flaming machinery of stars and modest molecules alike.

Whatever it was, he did not want to be surprised by the pattern. Caught by it, like a fish caught in a net it couldn’t see. Which was why he reinvented himself when necessary, as well as when unnecessary.

He was now Mr. John Morton, an accountant from Omaha, Nebraska. A dull, bland looking man who never traveled without his leather briefcase full of pens, paper, a calculator, a tablet loaded with all the latest accounting software, and a well-thumbed copy of the current IRS code.

Ferris settled into Mr. Morton’s dullness with ease. He had dyed his hair the night before, and wore blue-rimmed glasses, a false mustache, and colored contacts to match the photo on his driver’s license. A clear retainer over his upper teeth transformed the shape of his jaw and gave him a slight overbite. Lifts in his shoes added an extra half-inch in height. His clothes were suitably business-like: a dark blazer and tie, perfectly polished loafers, and a tan Burberry coat to top it all off.

Camouflage for the respectable tedium of money and business.

He read through the IRS code book during the flight. The couple sitting beside him did not bother talking to him. It was doubtful whether they even really saw him.

The plane landed at Sea-Tac airport with the rain lashing down from a grey, grim sky. Ferris took a taxi from the airport. He got off downtown, three blocks from Benaroya Hall. He checked his watch. The concert was scheduled to begin at seven pm. He had two hours to wait.

He bought a black umbrella at a convenience store and strolled down the street. He had already memorized the layout of the hall, the seating location of the target, the potential exits, the average response time of the Seattle police. It was all in his mind, neatly arranged in categories collated from the Bulgarian's information and confirmed by his own research.

Still, he always took a careful look at locations beforehand. Always. That's what kept him alive.

All his jobs started the same. A client, a target, a fee. Travel. A hotel room or some other place, such as that cabin up in the mountains in Idaho last year. Information. Maps. Schedules. Details. Potential collateral damage.

He didn't like collateral damage. Even though there was a coldness and silence inside of him that nothing seemed to touch anymore, he still dreamed of a winter day in the Hindu Kush. Years ago. The village high in the mountains of the Salang Pass. The dead children in the wreckage of the huts. The snow falling on them. Burying them because there was no one left alive to render this last small and homely honor to their memory.

Collateral damage wasn't acceptable.

At least, if he couldn't help it.

Which was why on this job, his briefcase carried nothing more alarming than pens and paper, the tablet and the calculator. And the IRS manual. He supposed the book was heavy enough to be lethal if you beat someone over the head with it. Or if you bored them to death by reading it aloud.

Ferris strolled down the street, rain pattering on his umbrella. Cars swished by. There was a fresh, damp smell from the rain, but there was also a chill in the air. He could feel it seeping into his bones. He didn't mind. He had worked in colder places.

Benaroya Hall was a massive, round structure of glass and concrete and steel. It loomed over an entire city block. He walked its perimeter in the rain. Security cameras stared out from eaves and corners, but his head was always safely hidden under the umbrella.

The Seattle symphony would be performing tonight. A fundraising concert for a local charity. Wagner and Dvorak. The target would be attending as he was one of the main donors for the event. According to the Bulgarian's information, the concert was in the larger of the two auditoriums. 2,500 seating capacity. But only 2,003 tickets had been made available. All of the tickets had sold. One of the tickets was his, tucked inside his briefcase.

2,003. A prime number.

His seat on the plane had been in the 19th row. Another prime number. And today was the 17th of March. Not just another prime, but a twin prime of 19.

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Part of his mind noticed things like that. Perhaps it was due to boredom.

Perhaps it was simply how his mind was wired. Whatever the reason, his mind noticed prime numbers appearing in unexpected places. It had a keen eye for fractals. And patterns. Design where there shouldn't be design. Design where it was not expected.

He wasn't superstitious. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Superstitions had no basis in fact. There was no ghost in the machine. There was no magic in the world. There was only the material of existence, as it was experienced, as it could be analyzed. The world, despite its occasional brutality and chaos, was best dealt with on practical terms. Every problem that life presented, every question, and every mystery, had a solution.

The most practical of all solutions was death.

Zero. Death was zero.

Zero wasn't a prime number. Of that, the mathematicians were sure, and he was humble enough to defer such matters to their reasoning. However, he found zero even more interesting than prime numbers. For thousands of years, people had been puzzling over the concept of zero, even as far back as the Sumerians, peering at the stars from the heights of their ziggurats. Whispering prayers to their long-dead gods and beginning to ask questions that were never answered. Not yet answered, even after centuries.

Down through the ages, mathematicians had kept on asking the same questions. Such as, what was the meaning of zero? Zero had quite a pedigree, particularly for such a little number that really wasn't even a number.

Ferris liked to think of zero as an absence. Not simply a negation of something else, something in existence. An absence.

Absence from life.

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The doors opened at a quarter past six. Limousines and taxi cabs pulled up to the front of the hall, dropping off their passengers and pulling away, only to be replaced by other cars. The Bulgarian's information was good. As ever. If it hadn't been, Ferris had a secondary plan, but he didn't need it now. A black Audi convertible pulled into the enormous parking garage next to the hall. A Spyder R8. The license plate was as the Bulgarian had noted. The car waited patiently for the Mercedes in front of it to pull through the ticket gate, then it purred up the ramp and out of the rain.

Ferris waited ten minutes and then he hurried across the street to the parking garage, umbrella conveniently held low to shield him from the security cameras slowly swiveling and staring down from their perches. He walked through the floors of the garage until he spotted the Audi. It was parked in a corner on the third floor. He glanced casually around. There was no one in sight. A security camera turned from side to side, high up on the wall about a hundred feet away. He skirted the edge of its view and, staying behind the row of cars, crept along until he came to the Audi.

To be honest, he didn't really mind being recorded on camera, but there was a chance the security system was monitored in real time. He didn't want to have to deal with some over-eager policemen. It was bad for business if he ended up killing law enforcement. It meant more scrutiny. It meant taking lives that he had no right to take.

Besides, he had to at least give the appearance of avoiding the cameras. If he

didn't, any self-respecting detective watching the footage several hours from then would immediately deduce he was wearing a disguise. He wanted at least four hours before they started considering that possibility.

The concrete floor was grimy with oil and dust, but Ferris didn't mind. The Boy Scouts had the right idea. Be prepared.

The lining of the briefcase lifted out when the combination was spun to the right numbers. It hid several useful things, including a tightly folded drop cloth of one millimeter thickness. He spread the drop cloth out beneath the front of the car and then carefully laid down on his back. The compartment beneath the briefcase lining also hid a package of plastique, a timer, a coil of wires, and two blasting caps in a tiny container. He inserted the caps into the plastique, clipped on the wires and switched on the timer. It blinked redly at him. He keyed in thirty minutes. Started the preset countdown on his watch. Then he removed his concert ticket and an elegant silver and black pen from the briefcase. He tucked them in his coat pocket. They were all he needed now. He wedged the briefcase securely above the Audi's driveshaft. He slid out from under the car. He folded up the tarp, dirty side in, and put it in his pocket. He walked away, a wary eye on the security cameras.

Lights shone in the darkness, sparkling in the rain. The enormous windows of the hall were alive with radiance. Raindrops gleamed in the hair of elegantly coiffed women as they ascended the steps to the main doors. It was a well-dressed evening, an evening of elegant dresses, well-cut suits, and the self-satisfied contentment of spending money on a notable charity. Seattle's finest residents on display. The charity benefiting was some sort of effort to save something.

Poor children, or polar bears or penguins. Weren't they all the same these days?

Ferris hadn't wasted time with that part of the Bulgarian's notes. People thought they could save the world when they couldn't even save themselves. Delusional. Delusional and blind.

His clothes were dark and conservatively enough cut to blend in with the crowd. He handed his ticket to one of the attendants just inside the main doors, was given a program in return, and then wandered through the lobby. His wristwatch vibrated gently. Five minutes gone. Twenty-five minutes to go. The crowd slowly moved up the stairs toward the concert hall. The air smelled of expensive perfume and money.

Halfway up the stairs, he spotted the target. He was surrounded by an orbit of people, glad-handers, sycophants in suits, those who wanted to be seen with him. Fools who wanted the honor of a quick word from him, or just the pleasure of his glance. A star with its accompanying planets and comets and bits of space debris.

The girl stood beside the target. She was attractive, there was no denying it, but he had become immune to that sort of beauty long ago.

What even was beauty? It was one of those questions that his mind puzzled over from time to time. The same part of his mind that noticed prime numbers, and odd sequences, and unanticipated design in everyday life. Echoes of something unexplained in the machinery of life. Things that had no real, practical reason. He resented things that had no reason.

Usually.

To be honest, he still appreciated Handel and Bach and maybe even some Johnny Cash when his mood was dark. He sincerely admired the elegance of a well-written book or the occasional painting. He had to admit that he didn't really understand the profound attraction of a well-composed symphony, or the unnerving,

almost otherworld, loveliness of a Raphael or a Botticelli. Why was *The Last Supper* so compelling? He did not know, and this troubled him.

But beauty in people? He found little of what he considered true beauty in people.

Not anymore.

The target and the girl turned left at the top of the stairs and made their way through the crowd past the double doors opening to the general seating area. Past those doors, four additional doors led to private balconies, mirroring four other private balconies on the opposite side of the hall. Ferris paused and pretended to examine his program while watching the target. The man opened the second of the four private doors and ushered the girl inside. The door closed.

His watch vibrated again. Twenty more minutes.

Ferris could hear the sounds of the orchestra tuning, the long, gliding notes of the violins, the imperious blare of the trumpets, the deeper foghorn call of the tubas, and the mournful tones of the cellos. The crowded corridor and the stairs below to the main entrance were thinning out as people sought their seats.

"The lights will dim in two minutes, sir," said an usher passing by.

"Thank you," said Ferris. "Could you tell me where the restroom is?"

"Down at the end, sir."

The usher pointed down the corridor. Past the four doors to the private balconies. Ferris already knew from the layout he had memorized, but he wanted the usher to remember his face. It would prove useful once the detectives started interviewing witnesses. A dead-end. Waste their time. Set them chasing a man who didn't exist.

If the usher had the intelligence to remember anything. Ferris couldn't control details like that.

He walked down the corridor. His footsteps were silent on the carpet. The restroom was empty. He shut himself in a stall and closed his eyes. His mind sorted through the next steps. Examined them for the last time. He listened to the beat of his heart. It was as calm as ever.

Not long now.

Dimly, he heard the orchestra begin to play. Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. He didn't need the program to recognize the melancholy of the strings. His watch vibrated against his wrist. Fifteen minutes left. He exited the restroom.

The corridor was deserted.

He stopped at the door to the second private balcony and gently tested the handle. It was locked. He had expected that, but he had a minute to spare. That's all he needed. He extracted two slim picks from a slit in the back of his leather belt. They were made of hard plastic. The picks were hooked at their ends. He slipped them into the lock and felt for the pins. The cylinder inside shifted and then turned. The handle opened and he silently stepped through.

It was dark inside the private balcony. The only light came from the stage far below the railing. The soprano singing Isolde's part stood in a soft pool of light, rage and sorrow vibrant in her lovely voice. Ferris could see the shadowed profiles of the target and the girl sitting side by side, intent on the orchestra below.

He took the pen from his pocket and unscrewed the cap. Carefully, he pulled off the pen nib to reveal a needle jutting from the reservoir tube of ink. Only it wasn't ink. He took a silent step forward and jammed the pen into the man's neck. The man gasped and then almost instantly went rigid. Beside him, the girl whirled around, blue



eyes wide and mouth opening to scream. But Ferris grabbed her by the neck, pressing against her carotid artery. She slumped over unconscious.

His watch vibrated. Ten minutes.

Ferris knelt by the man. He held him upright with the pressure of the pen in his neck and a hand on his arm.

"I've given you a neuromuscular blocker," he said quietly. "While you can no longer move, rest assured that the blocker doesn't cause lasting damage. However, when I click this pen twice more, it will inject something else. A toxin from a frog in the Amazon. *Phyllobates terribilis*. It's just a tiny little frog, but it's one of the most poisonous creatures on the planet. Your heart won't be able to cope under its influence. Every man has his limits. And you have exceeded yours in many ways."

Ferris clicked the pen once. The man's eyes stared frantically at him.

"The pain you're going to feel will be considerable. You'll experience it for about ten seconds before you die. My client had something more protracted in mind, but I have limits like everyone."

Ferris clicked the pen again.

The man's body stiffened. Ferris could feel the wildly racing heartbeat in the man's neck. It surged and galloped, tripping over itself. The heartbeat suddenly stopped under his hand. He let the body slump back into the seat. Isolde's vibrato filled the darkness of the concert hall air.

"Good night, Mr. Grey," said Ferris. He didn't bother looking at the unconscious girl. He could tell from her labored breathing that she was about to wake up.

He locked the door behind him as he left. The watch vibrated insistently against his wrist. Five minutes. The last five minutes.

Ferris was three blocks away, walking fast through the darkness, head hunched over in the rain, when the bomb blew beneath the Audi. It was a massive, ugly noise. A solid, sort of satisfying sound. He did not subscribe to the school of thought that found meaning in destruction, but he did consider it necessary from time to time. The car's destruction would provide him a comfortable cushion of time before law enforcement started thinking clearly.

He found an older model sedan down a dark side street. A Buick. It looked well-maintained. He broke the side window with his elbow and slipped inside. Sirens wailed in the distance. Older cars such as this one were easier to hot-wire than newer cars if you didn't have the necessary tools. The engine turned over with a rumble.

Ferris took the onramp for Highway 5 south toward Portland. He would change his appearance before he reached the city. The glasses, the contact lenses, the mustache. They would go out the window in different spots as he drove, along with the retainer and the thin, clear adhesive pads on his fingertips that were actually precise reproductions of the fingerprints of a well-known judge from California. That detail would give the Seattle police fits when they found those prints.

Ferris smiled slightly. Just because you were an assassin didn't mean you couldn't have a sense of humor. Occasionally. His smile faded.

The sedan's windshield wipers swished as the rain streamed down and the darkness blurred around him. The headlights of cars flared and bloomed past him, approaching in yellowish white and receding in red.

Three hours south of Seattle, the rain finally stopped and the cloud cover broke to reveal a night sky pin-pricked with stars. There was only darkness and light in that sky. Mostly darkness, true, but the stars were fierce and shining and

uncompromising in their brilliance. Only the darkness and the light, with nothing in between.

The End

### Author's Note

Until now, I've never written adaptive fiction. That's the fancy-pants terms I'm using for writing stories that riff on pre-existing stories. Fifty Shades of Reckoning is a serious parody, of course, but it is essentially an adaptation of James' original Fifty Shades story (which itself was fan fiction, a subset of adaptive fiction in my estimation).

Anyway, I tend to write more epic fantasy than this sort of story. If you haven't read [A Storm in Tormay](#), give it a try. It's old school fantasy in the tradition of Tolkien and Lewis and Lloyd Alexander.

Feel free to get in touch with me at my website at [www.christopherbunn.com](http://www.christopherbunn.com) or through [my email list](#). If you do sign up, please be assured that members of my email list will be contacted sparingly.

Sincerely,

Christopher Bunn

Other Books by Christopher Bunn

The Hawk and His Boy

The Shadow at the Gate

The Wicked Day

A Storm in Tormay: the Complete Tormay Trilogy

Tormay Tales

The Silver Girl

The Seal Whistle

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