Lovereading.co.uk

Market Forces

Richard Morgan

Published by Gollancz

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

RICHARD MORGAN

MARKET FORCES



PROLOGUE

Checkout.

The shiny black plastic swipes through.

Nothing.

The machine fails in its habitual insectile chittering and the screen blinks, as if outraged at what it has been fed. The checkout girl looks up at the woman who has handed her the card and smiles a little too widely. It's a smile that contains as much genuine emotion as there is fruit juice in a carton of Five Fruit D-Lish.

'*Are you sure you want to use this card?*'

Up to her arms in bagged shopping, the woman sets down the two-year-old she has been propping against the checkout flange and looks back to where her husband is still unloading the last of the brightly coloured tins and bags from the trolley.

'*Martin?*'

'*Yeah, what?*' *Voice irritable with the household task they've just completed.*

'*The card doesn't . . .*'

'*Doesn't what?*' *He meets her eyes and reads the distress there, then switches to the checkout girl. His voice comes out tight. 'Run it again, please. Must have glitched.*'

The girl shrugs and swipes the card a second time. The screen flickers with the same disdain.

TRANSACTION DENIED.

The girl takes the card and hands it back to the woman. A small pocket of quiet expands around the action, bubbling out past the conveyor belt to the boy at the next checkout unit and to the three customers waiting behind Martin. In a few more seconds it will dissolve into the slither of whispering.

'*Would you like to try another card.*'

'*This is ridiculous,' snaps Martin. 'That account had funds as of the first of the month. I've just been paid.*'

'*I can run the card a third time,' offers the girl with studied indifference.*

'*No.' The woman's knuckles have gone white around the small piece of black plastic. 'Martin, try the Intex.*'

'*Helen, there's money in that acc—*'

'*Some problem?' asks the man behind him, tapping his own plastic significantly against the pile of shopping he has assembled so close to the Next Customer divider that it's in danger of tumbling over into Martin's space.*

Martin's mouth shuts like a trap.

'*No problem.*'

He hands over the blue flecked Intex card and watches at least as intently as the people behind him as the checkout girl swipes it.

The machine chews it over for a couple of moments,

And spits it out.

The girl hands it back and shakes her head. Her smooth, plastic politeness is beginning to degrade.

'*Card's blocked,' she says dismissively. 'Terminal audit.*'

'What?'

'*Terminal audit. I'm going to have to ask you to put those purchases back on the far side of the counter and leave the store.*'

'*Run the card again.*'

The girl sighed. 'I don't have to run the card again, sir. I have all the information I need right here. Your rating is invalidated.'

'*Martin,' Helen presses forward at his side. 'Leave it, we'll come back when it's cleared u—*'

'*No, goddamn it.' Martin shrugs her off and leans over the counter, into the checkout girl's face. 'There is money in that account. Now swipe the card again.*'

'*Better do as she says,' says the pushy customer behind him.*

Martin swings on him, tensed.

'*This got something to do with you?*'

'*I* am *waiting.*'

'*Well, wait some fucking more.' He snaps his fingers in the man's face,*

dismissing him, and the pushy customer flinches back. Martin turns back to the checkout girl. 'Now, you—'

The prod hits him in the side like a rude elbow. A heartbeat later the charge shocks him off the counter and into a seemingly immense clear space. He hits the floor, smelling burnt fabric.

He hears Helen shriek. Sees confusedly from floor level. Boots in front of him and a voice that sounds like tearing cardboard at a great height.

'*I think you'd better leave the store, sir.*'

The security guard hauls him to his feet and props him against the counter again. A big man, swelling at the waist but watchful and hard around the eyes. He's been doing this for a long time, probably cut his teeth on cordoned zone clubs before he got this gig. He's shocked men before and Martin is out of office clothes at four-thirty on a Wednesday afternoon, casual in faded jeans and a well-worn crew-neck pullover that doesn't show what it was once worth. The security guard thinks he has the measure of this one. He doesn't know, can't know.

Martin comes off the counter.

The palm heel strike smashes the guard's nose flat. The knee goes in at groin level. As the guard falls, Martin drives into the base of his skull with one clenched fist.

The guard hits the ground a dead weight.

'Stand where you are!'

Martin reels around and comes face to face with the guard's smaller, female partner just as she clears a pistol from her holster. Still scrambled from the cattle prod, he lurches the wrong way, towards her, and the guard blows his brains out all over his wife and son and the checkout and the checkout girl and all the shiny packaged items on the belt that they can no longer afford.

FILE#1:
Initial Investment

CHAPTER ONE

Awake.

Jackknifed there in sweat.

Fragments of the dream still pinning his breath in his throat and his face into the pillow, mind reeling in the darkened room . . .

Reality settled over him like a fresh sheet. He was home.

He heaved a shuddering sigh and groped for the glass of water beside the bed. In the dream he'd been falling to, and then through, the tiles of the supermarket floor.

On the other side of the bed Carla stirred and laid a hand on him.

'Chris?'

' 'sokay. Dream.' He gulped from the glass. 'Bad dream, s'all.'

'Murcheson again?'

He paused, peculiarly unwilling to correct her assumption. He didn't dream about Murcheson's screaming death much any more. He shivered a little. Carla sighed and pulled herself closer to him. She took his hand and pressed it onto one full breast.

'My father would just love this. Deep stirrings of conscience. He's always said you haven't got one.'

'Right.' Chris lifted the alarm clock and focused on it. Three-twenty. Just perfect. He knew he wouldn't get back to sleep for a while. *Just fucking perfect*. He flopped back, immobile. 'Your father has convenient amnesia when it comes to clearing the rent.'

'Money talks. Why'd you think I married you?'

He rolled his head and butted her gently on the nose. 'Are you taking the piss out of me?'

For answer she reached down for his prick and rolled it through her fingers.

'No. I'm winding you up,' she whispered.

As they drew together he felt the hot gust of desire for her blowing out the dream, but he was slow to harden under her hand. It was only in the final throes of climax that he finally let go.

Falling.

It was raining when the alarm sounded. Soft hiss outside the open window like an untuned TV at very low volume. He snapped off the bleeper, lay listening to the rain for a few moments and then slid out of the bed without waking Carla.

In the kitchen he set up the coffee machine, ducked into the shower and got out in time to steam milk for Carla's cappuccino. He delivered it to her bedside, kissed her awake and pointed it out. She'd probably drift off to sleep again and drink it cold when she finally got up. He lifted clothes from the wardrobe – plain white shirt, one of the dark Italian suits, the Argentine leather shoes. He took them downstairs.

Dressed but untied, he carried his own double espresso into the living room with a slice of toast to watch the seven o'clock bulletins. There was, as usual, a lot of detailed foreign commentary and it was time to go before the Promotions & Appointments spot rolled around. He shrugged, killed the TV and only remembered to knot his tie when he caught himself in the hall mirror. Carla was just making waking noises as he slipped out of the front door and disabled the alarms on the Saab.

He stood in the light rain for a long moment, looking at the car. Soft beads of water glistening on the cold grey metal. Finally, he grinned.

'Conflict Investment, here we come,' he muttered, and got in.

He got the bulletins on the radio. They started Promotions & Appointments as he hit the Elsenham junction ramp. Liz Linshaw's husky tones, just a touch of the cordoned zones to roughen up the otherwise cultured voice. On TV she dressed like a cross between a government arbitrator and a catered-party exotic dancer, and in the last two years she had graced the pages of every men's lifestyle magazine on the rack. The discerning exec's wet dream, and by popular acclaim the AM ratings queen of the nation.

'—very few challenges on the roads this week,' she told him huskily. 'The Congo bid play-off we've all been waiting on is postponed till next week. You can blame the weather forecasts for that, though it looks from my window as if those guys have blown it again. There's less rain coming down than we had for Saunders/Nakamura. Still nothing on the no-name orbital call out for Mike Bryant at Shorn Associates. Don't know where you've got to Mike, but if you can hear me we're anxious to hear from you. And so to new appointments this week – Jeremy Tealby makes partner at Collister Maclean; I think we've all seen that coming for a long time now; and Carol Dexter upgrades to senior market overseer for Mariner Sketch, following her spectacular performance last week against Roger Inglis. Now back to Shorn again for word of a strong newcomer in the Conflict Investment division—'

Chris's eyes flickered from the road to the radio. He touched up the volume a notch.

'—Christopher Faulkner, headhunted from investment giants Hammett McColl where he's already made a name for himself in Emerging Markets. Regular Prom & App followers may recall Chris's remarkable string of successes at Hammett McColl, commencing with the swift elimination of rival Edward Quain, an exec some twenty years his senior at the time. Vindication of the move came rapidly when—' Excitement ran an abrupt slice into her voice, 'Oh, and this just in from our helicopter team. The no-name call out on Mike Bryant has broken, with two of the challengers down past junction twenty-two and the third signalling a withdrawal. Bryant's vehicle has apparently sustained minimal damage and he's on his way in now. We'll have in-depth coverage and an exclusive interview for the lunchtime edition. Looks like the start of a good week for Shorn Associates then, and I'm afraid that's all we've got time for this morning, so back to the Current Affairs desk. Paul.'

'Thank you, Liz. First up, the falling rates of production in the manufacturing sector threaten a further ten thousand jobs across the NAFTA territories, according to an analysis by the Glasgow-based Independent News Group. A Trade and Finance Commission spokesman has called the report "subversively negative". More on the—'

Chris tuned it out, vaguely annoyed that Bryant's no-name scuffle had knocked his name off Liz Linshaw's crimson lips. The rain had stopped and his wipers were beginning to squeak. He switched them off and shot a glance at the dashboard clock. He was still running early.

The proximity alarm chimed.

He caught the accelerating shape in the otherwise deserted rearview and slewed reflexively right. Into the next lane, brake back. As the other vehicle drew level, he relaxed. The car was battered and primer-painted in mottled tan, custom-built like his own but not by anyone who had any clue about road-raging. Heavy steel barbs welded onto the front fenders, bulky external armouring folded around the front wheels and jutting back to the doors. The rear wheels were broad-tyred to provide some manoeuvring stability but it was still clear from the way the car moved that it was carrying far too much weight.

No-namer.

Like fifteen-year-old cordoned zone thugs, they were often the most dangerous because they had the most to prove, the least to lose. The other driver was hidden behind a slat-protected side window, but Chris could see movement. He thought he made out the glimmer of a pale face. Along the car's flank was flashed the driver number in luminous yellow paint. He sighed and reached for the comset.

'Driver Control,' said an anonymous male voice.

'This is Chris Faulkner of Shorn Associates, driver clearance 260B354R, inbound on M11 past junction ten. I have a possible no-name challenger number X23657.'

'Checking. A moment please.'

Chris began to build his speed, gradually so that the no-namer would soak up the acceleration without tripping into fight mode. By the time the controller came back on, they were pacing each other at about one hundred and forty kilometres an hour.

'That's confirmed, Faulkner. Your challenger is Simon Fletcher, freelance legal analyst.'

Chris grunted. *Unemployed lawyer*.

'Challenge filed at 8.04. There's a bulk transporter in the slow

lane passing junction eight, automated. Heavy load. Otherwise no traffic. You are cleared to proceed.'

Chris floored it.

He made a full car length and slewed back in front of the other vehicle, forcing Fletcher to a split-second decision. Ram or brake. The tan car dropped away and Chris smiled a little. The brake reflex was instinctive. You had to have a whole different set of responses drilled into you before you could switch it off. After all, Fletcher should have *wanted* to ram him. It was a standard duel tactic. Instead, his instincts had got the better of him.

This isn't going to last long.

The lawyer accelerated again, closing. Chris let him get within about three feet of his rear fender, then hauled out and braked. The other car shot ahead and Chris tucked in behind.

Junction eight flashed past. Inside the London orbital now, almost into the zones. Chris calculated the distance to the underpass, nudged forward and tapped at Fletcher's rear. The lawyer shot away from the contact. Chris checked his speed display and upped it. Another tap. Another forward flinch. The automated haulage transport appeared like a monstrous metal caterpillar, ballooned in the slow lane and then dropped behind just as rapidly. The underpass came into sight. Concrete yellowed with age, stained with faded graffiti that pre-dated the five-metre exclusion fencing. The fence stuck up over the parapet, topped with springy rolls of razor wire. Chris had heard it carried killing voltage.

He gave Fletcher another shove and then slowed to let him dive into the tunnel like a spooked rabbit. A couple of seconds of gentle braking, then accelerate again and in after him.

Shutdown time.

Beneath the weight of the tunnel's roof, things were different. Yellow lights above, two tip-to-tail rows of them like tracer fire along the ceiling. Ghostly white 'emergency exit' signs at intervals along the walls. No breakdown lane, just a scuffed and broken line to mark the edge of the metalled road and a thin concrete path for maintenance workers. A sudden first-person-viewpoint arcade game. Enhanced sense of speed, fear of wall impact and dark.

Chris found Fletcher and closed. The lawyer was rattled –

telegraphed clear in the jerky way the car was handling. Chris took a wide swing out into the other lanes so that he'd disappear from Fletcher's rearview mirror and matched velocities dead level. One hundred and forty on the speedo again – both cars were running dead level and the underpass was only five miles long. Make it quick. Chris closed the gap between the two cars by a yard, flicked on his interior light and, leaning across to the passenger side window, raised one hand in stiff farewell. With the light on, Fletcher couldn't fail to see it. He held the pose for a long moment, then snapped the hand into a closed fist with the thumb pointing down. At the same time, he slewed the car one-handed across the intervening lane.

The results were gratifying.

Fletcher must have been watching the farewell gesture, not the road ahead and he forgot where he was. He jerked his car aside, pulled too far and broadsided the wall in a shower of sparks. The primer-painted car staggered drunkenly, raked fire off the concrete once more and bounced away in Chris's wake, tyres shrieking. Chris watched in the mirror as the lawyer braked his vehicle to a sprawling halt, sideways across two lanes. He grinned and slowed to about fifty, waiting to see if Fletcher would pick up the challenge again. The other car showed no sign of restarting. It was still stationary when he hit the upward incline at the far end of the underpass and lost sight of it.

'Wise man,' he murmured to himself.

He emerged from the tunnel into an unexpected patch of sunlight. The road vaulted, climbing onto a long raised curve that swept in over the expanses of zoneland and angled towards the cluster of towers at the heart of the city. Sunlight struck down in selective rays. The towers gleamed.

Chris accelerated into the curve.