Rogues

by MajorEnglishEsquire

Summary

You often speak of feeling as if you are at sea. Alone and at peace there. I, myself, sometimes feel like I'm rolling on the distant waves but your light falls on me and I am known.

Begins at the end of episode 01.08 Fromage.
After the team wheels Tobias Budge's body out of the office, Will helps Hannibal get down to his car. He limps a lot and trips a little and Will attempts to catch him with his unwounded hand, remembers too late that the wrist still hurts, and nearly fumbles him, which only goes to prove they're a mess and not very good at being attacked.

Hannibal had thought Budge had killed Will.
He keeps giving Will these soft looks.

"Lotta paperwork to fill out. And Jack will want it sooner than later," he shrugs Hannibal's bag off his shoulder and ineptly sort of dumps it into the passenger seat before helping Hannibal sit. "Going to the hospital?"

"I think I ought to," he gingerly taps a finger against his bloody nose and across a developing bruise on his forehead.
Will's hand is big and clumsy with how they wrapped it up on his own trip to the ER, but he carefully snags strands of Hannibal's messy hair and pushes it up, out of his eyes. Weird seeing him so out of sorts. Discomforting. "Want company?"

"I will be in company, I think. If I'm not mistaken, Ms. Blackwell should be on shift at the moment."

"Oh, I see how it is," Will smiles. "Go flirt with your old nurses like you don't know they're probably miffed to see you there. I bet you were a tyrant. Don't come crying to me when they wrap you up too tight."

It finally gets another wondering little smile out of Hannibal.
Will clears his throat. "Anyway, lemme know when you're ready to go do Jack's whole review-slash-interrogation thing. I'll walk you through it."

Hannibal swallows and nods. "Thank you. I will appreciate the help."

"Be careful," Will finally forces himself to say. "Just don't pass out on the way there or anything."
He can't help his concern. Hannibal looks better sitting down, but the limp was pronounced.

"I will. I'll..." He considers for a moment. "I'll let you know."

Hannibal is the joyfully independent type. Loves his quiet time, Will can tell. This concession - it means something. Will doesn't intend to offer assistance where it's insulting, but, after seeing what Budge did to Hannibal, he just can't help but feel responsible. He really does need to know Hannibal will be alright after this.

He nods, shuts the door carefully and, out of old habit, taps the roof. Waits to watch him pull out and drive away.

Honestly, Will's got enough to worry about with his... whatever his brain is doing right now. It was just.

Awful. It was rattling to see the Doctor in that state of shock. With unfamiliar people crawling all across his space; wounded and having had death visit him twice in the span of mere minutes.
He doesn't deserve to have to endure this. It's not true, that he got himself into this.

It was Will. And it was Jack.

When Will returns to the office, he kind of expects to take hell from Jack for letting Dr. Lecter go to the hospital on his own.

But he doesn't.

Jack meets his eyes and tells him to head to the nearby field office for a debrief.

It's that one thing - that absence of something - that changes everything.

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Jack and Will's first real conversation about Abigail Hobbs, outside of debriefs and talking evidence, was in the Hobbs cabin, where Jack said Abigail was on the short list of suspects as an accomplice.

It was disgusting. Her throat had been opened and her eyes were those of dead girls. Will had stared down into her face as she gasped and gargled, watching her slip away.

She shared features with every girl who went missing and her own father tried to kill her last for his very own satisfaction. She still wasn't even conscious, still hadn't even made enough blood on her own to replace what she lost, but already Jack wanted her in prison.

It turned Will's stomach that Jack thought that way.

Jack pulls the same shit when there's still one body cooling inside of Doctor Lecter's office. Will walked in with him and Hannibal explained exactly what happened and all Jack could think about was how Hannibal was still there -- not that he had survived, but that he had admittedly killed.

To Jack, the dead bodies outrank the needs of the living.

So Will has to be the one who cares for the living. With Jack casting suspicious eyes at both Abigail and Hannibal, Will follows his feeling of kinship with the two of them.

Talking to the bodies - sympathizing with the dead? Madness really does lay down that path. Jack can make Franklin's acquaintance where he lies on the floor. He can let the analysists and techs tell him about Budge's last breaths.

Will leaves, does his paperwork and goes home. Needs to hear from Hannibal. Anxiously awaits word from him.

Not that he looks forward to phone calls, in general. If Will ever picks up on the first ring it's to get a call over with. He's known himself to get entire to-do lists done rather than sit and make simple calls to, like, the bank. His insurance. Booking haircuts online is a fucking blessing.

But when Hannibal doesn't call that night, he's forced to try Alana the next morning. (Because all he knows is his office number.) She picks up on the last ring, voice hesitant. He can't blame her, so he quickly sums up what happened to Hannibal - the friendship, the music shop, the attack, the deaths - and asks for her help contacting him.

She responds with a long minute of silence.
"Um. Exactly what the fuck happened??" she sounds walloped.

Will carefully backtracks, explaining as best as he can.
He skirts around the issue of Hannibal's tip since that might hang Alana up on the wrong issue. Will explains about Hannibal's patient. Budge's attack. Sending Hannibal to the hospital by himself.

Alana is silent for a while again and he settles in, reluctant but willing to give her the gory details if she needs-- finally, she stops him, gives him the cell number, then, and demands that Will have Hannibal call her after. She's shaken by it, too, and she hasn't even heard the... well... "the good stuff" - the intense shit he left out. But someone died under Hannibal's care and her heart just immediately breaks for him. She needs to talk to him. Needs to know that he'll be seeing his own psychiatrist for therapy after it.

Will promises to pass on the message.

Hannibal answers his cell phone, "Hello, Will."

Will blinks. "You recognize my number?"

"I had it, already. And haven't called because I decided rest and a rather large painkiller might do me some good."

Will sighs, rolls his eyes at himself. "Oh- okay. Did it?"

"I think it rather did. How are your hands this morning?"

"Well," he flexes the free one. "Awful. But I'm already on enough painkillers," he kinda laughs. "Um. If you're still resting, we can talk another time-"

"No, that's quite alright. Thank you for checking on me," he says, clearly a little bemused. "Are you on leave after yesterday's incident?"

"I am, yes. Mandatory," he takes a deep breath. "And please tell me you're not headed to the office today."

"No," he sounds kind of quiet and sad. "No. I need to make a few more cancellations with patients. Then, as I'm sure you could have predicted, there are multiple messages from Jack Crawford to answer."

Will cringes. "Yeah. Um. Alana is also wondering-- I'm. I'm sorry, but I asked for your number and she needed to know why, just- I just gave her the basics. She wants to know that you're alright."

It's quiet down the line for a long moment. "These cancellation calls are necessary for me. Unfortunately I can't say the same for Jack and Alana. It feels discourteous, but-"

"No. No, they've gotta understand. Believe me, no one expects you to be an old hand at trauma suddenly invading your life," Will tries to assure him. And he's about to offer to tell Jack to go fuck himself (not in those words, of course) but before he can:

"I'll be through with my obligations shortly. Come to the house, if you will. Come for lunch and then I can face fierce Agent Crawford," there's a slight smile back in his voice. And if cooking for people makes him happy?

"Sure. Um. I'll be there. Then we can go face him, okay? Together."

"I'll see you by noon, I'm sure. Until then."

"Until then," Will agrees.
Lunch is modest.

Well. Modest for Hannibal. And mostly because it seems like he took it as a challenge to have everything ready by the time Will walked in.

He even took Will's hands as a challenge. They eat little morsels of meat and well done vegetables from small, rosemary branch skewers, no other utensils required. There's some mushroom broth, too, but even Dr. Prim-and-Proper sips from his delicate little bowl. Will just follows his lead.

And observes him, too.

He looks less worn and shocked than yesterday, but his wounds are bandaged and his bruises have picked up a lot of color.

God. Will feels so fucking guilty. Hannibal limps back into the kitchen and Will follows with whatever he can carry.

They're quiet, putting things away. And then Hannibal gets ready to leave.

"Meet you there, or?"

"I am able to drive," Hannibal says. "If you don't mind?"

Not at all.

The drive, the continued quiet in the car, gives him the opportunity to take a deep breath and admit, "If I weren't so damn whacked out, it would've been three-on-one. Budge would never have slipped out, never have had the chance to divide and assault those officers. He never would have come to kill your patient. Never would have hurt you."

Hannibal doesn't say anything.

"I'm sorry."

"There's nothing an apology can do, Will. Much as I want to appreciate its sincerity - and I do, to an extent - the actions you can take far outweigh the words you can offer in these circumstances." He weighs his own words for a moment. "And I don't allude to your competency as an agent in that. I am aware of your service record and I know your value. What I won't abide is an apology given under the pretense that it was your own missteps that allowed Budge's escape. Rather, it was the force of another. Though maybe it would do better to be silent on the issue, I don't know how much longer I might hold my tongue when it is you, yourself, who has offered to act as a buffer between an outside party and Dear Uncle Jack."


"I am an inside party, then?" Hannibal spares a second from the road to grin. "A part of the family?"

Well. Weird, pathetic family. But any closer than found family might be a little too... intimate. Even if it does seem like Hannibal considers him a friend.

"Or," he continues, "a part of you," Hannibal suggests it when Will doesn't.

Amazing to hear him put voice to it. Not that it doesn't fit right - it's one of a few things that does - it just maybe isn't what Will ever expected to hear. It's. You know. Kind of uncomfortable for him to
get close to people. Of all the folks around him, lately, he wouldn't mind if he and Hannibal were a part of each other's lives. It feels...

It feels good. But he doesn't respond to that, specifically. It's too much; closer than he deserves.

He barged into Hannibal's house just the other day to tell him about Alana. That was, like, plenty of social development for one week. Will shifts slightly in the seat. "You saw a killer come in and break your patient's neck. You defended yourself. You did it well," Will almost laughs a little at the understatement. "Whatever Jack has in store for your interrogation, you don't deserve it. I just want you to know that." If anyone does deserve a highly-intrusive investigation, maybe Will does.

"So long as we agree that it is you and I united against him, at least for the afternoon. Even as it may go against the grain of the very structure of your career, Will, let us together leave some of the blame on Jack Crawford's doorstep. You take too much on yourself. It concerns me how far you will take your obeisance of him. You did not begin hallucinating on your own. If you are truly to defend me, let me stand with my equal at least for today."

Hannibal doesn't exactly do impassioned or incredibly inspiring speeches. But sometimes his earnestness sucker-punches Will and all he can do is nod. Agree. Try to hold himself to it.

Strange to be called Hannibal's equal, even if it's just for a while, as he says. Will doesn't do teamwork a whole lot. He wonders if he's even got it in him.

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Until, of course, Jack's got Hannibal pinned down like a fly on the other side of his desk.

While taking his statement, Jack relentlessly harasses Hannibal about the details of Budge's death like he had some sort of wide selection of weapons at hand and simply chose the heaviest object in the room with the intention of killing with prejudice, instead of saving his own life, when two jurisdictions of law enforcement literally failed him.

"Jack," Will pipes in from the far corner of the office to object again, to get him to back off a little, and it's one too many times.

"Agent Graham, you are superfluous in these circumstances. You are an excess of objections and interruptions and if you say my name one more goddamn time-" Jack begins to snap.

Will pops up from his perch on the corner table and approaches at speed as if he intends to threaten him.

Jack jolts in his seat. And squints where Will stops, grabbing for Hannibal's hand and helping pull him to stand. "We are not. finished. here."

"We're not," Will agrees. "Write your damn report, Jack. We'll get coffee and come back after I've walked Dr. Lecter from the room and you can observe how he hobbles. Because you seem a little fucking unclear on who got attacked, here," he widens his eyes and pointedly turns his back helping Hannibal limp into the hallway, just to press the point of the absurdity of Jack acting like Hannibal is the bad guy.

Hannibal obliges him. Will thinks he even sees a hurt, broken little look thrown over his shoulder at Jack and he leans into Will a bit like he sincerely needs the help. Will supports all of the weight shifted onto him all the way down to the cafeteria. He gets coffee for them both and expects that Hannibal will take a cup only to be polite, but he takes it up, holds it between his hands, and sips, looking satisfied.
"Teamwork?" Will says, settling in the chair opposite.

"Agent Crawford's job is to antagonize. Much as I expected it from him, I find a welcome reprieve in your show of support."

"I know Jack's just doing what Jack does, but he didn't grill me like this and I got two officers killed."

"They weren't of his own brood," Hannibal points out.

"Neither were the two men in your office. He's," Will stops and laughs. Hannibal sits forward a little, curious about the joke.

"He's basically unhappy that you bagged his kill," Will keeps laughing to consider it. "You stole his collar."

Hannibal seems conflicted as to whether to be amused or disapproving.

"I'll just have to find that hilarious for you," Will decides. "It's impressive. If he had any sense he'd be impressed with you for stopping a fledgling serial killer but for now he's just," Will waves a hand, almost knocks his cup and soaks his bandages in coffee, "he's just pouting."

Hannibal considers this for a time. "How long, then, do we let him pout by himself?"

"Oh he'll track us down. Come down here and finish filling in the blanks with you all nice and civil."

"Well. Then I appreciate that my teammate could bring some civility to the proceedings."

"No problem," Will grins.

But really? It isn't very polite when it happens.

After twenty minutes, Jack finds them. Pulls over a chair. Sits down and opens a legal folder. Hands Hannibal a pen to confirm his account of things.

And Hannibal pauses, reading what Jack typed up. He has to object to some of the information Jack included about his patient in the report and suddenly Jack's got no more damn time for them. "It's almost as if you want the investigation turned to yourself, Doctor Lecter. Are you seriously so eager for the spotlight?"

Hannibal closes the folder and slides it back over. "Jack," he starts.

"This conflict ended with you, in your office. In the case of any other civilian, this would result in a murder charge or two when-"

"Hold on," Will jumps in.

"Are you his damn lawyer now?" Jack challenges.

"Just hold on!" Will insists. "The fight ended at Hannibal's office because it started when I had my back turned, Jack! It started on a tip-" he lowers his voice to a hiss, "that Hannibal gave me against his better judgment. Now if you're pressing the point because you really wanna alienate him? Go ahead. But judging by his access to information and knowledge and the confirmed ability to kill rather than be killed? I'd rather have him on our side. You're gonna feed his career to the dogs because you're bitter about not having another criminal to process through the court system? Jack,
"this was a win."

"And a loss for you," Crawford eases back and points out, grinning as if he hadn't been on offense one minute ago. "Why did you step outside, Will? To take a very important call?"

"Or in answer to the suffocating yank of your chain, perhaps?" Hannibal slips in before Will can even gather a response. He casually continues nursing his coffee and the smile slips from Jack's face.

Jack's got just about as much idea what to do with that as Will. For his part, Will can't decide if he's pissed at Hannibal for putting words in his mouth or cowed because Jack's mocking is more on-target than Hannibal's defense is true of the situation.

He hasn't told either of them about the hallucination yet.

But from the look of him, Jack thinks he knows the likely nature of the thing and now he's laughing again.

And Hannibal thinks he knows the likely nature of the thing and is determined that Will should only reveal it at his own discretion.

Hannibal doesn't glance to Will. He keeps calm and serious. His hand goes to his own leg and he flexes where it's sore. Where Budge stabbed him.

Teammates for an afternoon.

All Will has to do is shut up and not refute it. Then he doesn't have to say what it really was.

He puts on a guilty face. Briefly meets Hannibal's eyes. And drops them, swinging his gaze to Jack's shoulder.

And as easy as that, the perceived guilt rolling off of Will drops from his own bandaged hands and into Jack's lap.

Agent Crawford sobered instantly.

Will's psychiatrist may be his fun new perp to bat around when there are no real consequences to the implications, but when the consequences to Jack's treatment of Will involve the disintegration of Will's attention during the questioning of a suspect – make him turn away from Budge to answer the phone, to be at Jack's beck and call—

Well. That makes Jack directly responsible for the incident at the music shop. The dead BPD officers.

A soft, token objection: "No, listen, Jack, I-" Will lets himself be interrupted.

"We will redact the more sensitive information, Dr. Lecter," Jack allows, more calm than he was before. He flips open the briefcase he used to bring the papers down and searches. He finds a Sharpie and hands it over.

Hannibal takes the papers back to black-out any information necessary to protect Franklin's medical history. Then signs, and slides it all back.

Jack leaves them there to finish their coffee. Case closed.
Alana calls Hannibal's phone on the way back to his place. He doesn't wish to be rude, so he asks leave to answer on a headset. Will doesn't mind.

He hears only one end of the conversation and is already amused over Alana's probing questions as to Hannibal's health and wellbeing before he actually attributes his current care to Will.

"We were quite a team. Will is a skilled protector," Hannibal glances over and smiles despite the growing dark.

Will laughs.

Hannibal clearly takes the call lightly, even if Alana doesn't. Will can't hear her, but the strain in her far-away tone is high, tight, and chiding. Eventually her concern even wears off on Hannibal a little.

When he hangs up and sets the earpiece in the console, he asks, "Would you like to discuss the reason you stepped out of Tobias Budge's shop, Will?"

He sighs. "Not particularly."

"Am I correct in assuming this was a reoccurring incidence of aural hallucinations?"

Will shifts in the seat, suddenly feeling smaller than when he was under Jack’s sneer.

"I hardly need tell my teammate he can trust me," Hannibal says in a much milder tone.

Shit.


Hannibal is quiet on the other side of the car for several long miles. "Thank you for telling me. Am I right to assume you haven't told Jack?"

"As soon as he checks his call log, asks around to the rest of the team, I mean, he'll know he wasn't the one yanking my leash. It was my own head."

"If he does notice, I'll tell him it was me returning a message from you. Your psychiatrist. I'll tell him it was his own dogged calls I'm forced to council you through," Hannibal refuses to move the blame. "A raccoon, coyote, dog. Whatever sound your hallucinations carry may as well be Jack's voice. He is responsible for what's been deteriorating inside your head."

Here they go again, with Hannibal telling Will what he's doing is dangerous and has to stop. And Will telling him it's too important to stop. The world needs Jack yanking Will around by the throat, crime scene to crime scene.

However. "Before I repeat my concerns once more," Hannibal says, "and far from intending to manipulate you one way or another, Will: I could see, in your eyes, the guilt you used to cow Jack Crawford, and that it stemmed from reentering that building to find two officers dead. There's no way of knowing that Tobias Budge couldn't have more or less easily killed all three of you at once. But I must ask you to consider the weight of that particular guilt. Two men who did die, weighed against the lives of those who may or may very well not end. Through no fault of your own. It is not your responsibility to save the entire world, Will. While it's also not your responsibility to answer for
those two bodies, as, in my opinion, Jack is responsible for them, I still must wonder if another agent couldn't have just as easily taken your place." He pauses as if uncomfortable. "You also must understand that my own sensibilities stand in objection to you putting yourself in danger. Will, it is you whom I call a friend. And you easily could have died. For the hours between the attack and your reappearance, in fact, I believed you had died. And." He sighs. "I did not know where to begin my mourning. I have not truly been on a singular and declared team with you before today, despite the things we've been through together, including what happened in Abigail's home. And imagining all the circumstances we've yet to share as friends was a large part of that mourning. The world would be worse off without you in it. The whole world. Not just that part of it which lies within the FBI's jurisdiction."

Will is a little unprepared for how that makes him feel.

He wants to tell Hannibal how impossible it is for him to let the world burn and blister within the reach of his grasp. He cannot let the Garret Jacob Hobbses and Tobias Budges of the world exist without consequence when he's capable of standing in their way.

But if he looks in the direction Hannibal has been pointing him, again and again, he might be in danger of seriously considering that other people are capable of doing this work from a healthier mindset.

And worse: That it's narcissism and vanity to think of himself as the only one qualified for the job.

He takes off his glasses and rubs at his eyes. Sets the frames on his knee and watches the reflection of streetlamps in the lenses. "Do you think it's egotistical? That I can't tell Jack to go find somebody else?"

"You did tell Jack to find someone else. On the first day, you referred him to Alana. Jack told her and she told me. You didn't wish to be a part of this."

Will thinks about that. Tries to remember exactly what he'd said. How much he didn't wanna stare into dead eyes again. Didn't want to see what they saw dying. But here he is.

It's a good thing. He knows this. It might slow Will down, might make him feel like crap, but it stops the bad guys. It saves lives.

Shit. Is he getting off on putting people in danger and saving lives intermittently? Just like a damn psychopath with a god complex?

Fuck.

He's too afraid to say it out loud, all of a sudden. He can't lose Hannibal's respect by pointing it out. He also can't lose his own self-respect by folding under the suggestions of a friend.

Will is his own damn person. These are his mistakes to make.

He remembers the body of the officer on the floor, bleeding out in Budge's music shop.

They really aren't his own mistakes to make. And he knows it.

The darker his mind goes, the further away he gets from reality, the more his own mistakes scar the world around him.

No better than those he hunts.
Well. The FBI hunts.
And Jack hunts.

And Will is the bloodhound.

On a chain.

They're almost back by the time Hannibal finally fishes for him again, his voice curling out of the dark of the car's interior. "Will?"

"I'm hearing you. Believe me, I'm hearing you. I don't-. Maybe I can't weigh it all out so easily, though. Not right now."

"You needn't do so alone," Hannibal points out.

Right. But he will.
He knows he will.

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Will's got a week of leave and he'll need to follow up with a doctor to see if rehab will be necessary for his wounded hands.

And he hates calling the damn doctor's office.

Hannibal is a doctor, and Hannibal's also taking time off. Will also needs to check on him again. A call from Jack regarding the paperwork reminds him of it.

He doesn't call to announce himself. Just drives up to Baltimore.

Hannibal's car isn't in his driveway.
Well. That was a waste of time.

He goes into town to hunt down a pharmacy and a coffee shop. By the time he orders, he twigs to the text message and the voicemail tone on his phone.

Hannibal texts?
For some reason Will didn't expect it of him.

**May have been mistaken. Are you in Baltimore? Thought I spotted your car.**

He doesn't listen to the voice message before he calls outright.

"Hey. Yeah, that was me."

"Will you be returning to Wolf Trap anytime soon?"

"Well," he accepts his coffee at pick-up, nods vaguely at the woman behind the counter, "um. I was actually looking for you?"

"I had an early appointment with my therapist. Would you care to come by?"

"Sure. On my way, as long as I'm not intruding."

"Let yourself in, I'll be finishing up in the kitchen by then."
"Another lunch-time challenge?" Will laughs.

"You know how I pride myself in attending to my guests," there's a smile in his voice. "At this point I would be considered uncivil if I didn't delight everybody with a meal upon arrival. It is an unfortunate burden I have brought down upon myself, I'm afraid."

Will laughs again. "Some burden," he scoffs, "you love it."

"I'm feeling quite caught out. I think that's the end of this conversation. Perhaps your appetite is a truer friend to me than you are and, therefore, it is very much invited. If Will Graham should arrive, I'll consider letting him dine with us."

Will's a little more delighted by his sense of humor than even the idea of another gourmet lunch. "Well, I see how it is. See you in twenty minutes. Or not."

"See you shortly, Will," his voice still smiles.

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Nearing the end of lunch, Hannibal brushes his napkin over his mouth and changes tack from their current conversation. "I confess I had other items on my personal agenda today. It doesn't mean you're uninvited-"

"Oh," Will clears his throat, "No, I get it. Didn't mean to just take over your day when you're busy."

"On the contrary, spotting your car, earlier, gave me an idea. Come with me, if you will. If you have no pressing matters at home."

He shrugs, shakes his head, moves his fork around his plate some more. "I'm just supposed to be healing. Processing and such."

"I can take a look at the progress you've made with your hands, but come with me, then. I'm to meet with a realtor."

Will's a little surprised. "Planning on moving?"

Hannibal wavers a bit. "Some issues have come to light recently that must be addressed before they cause me more trouble."

Will puts everything down to carefully take up his water glass. "You're having a hard time thinking about going back to work where you were attacked," he guesses.

He seems to weigh his ideas out. "I'm not sure. I do wish to return to my practice as soon as possible. A return to normality would be..." He seems to consider, arranging his silverware on the plate. "I would like things to continue progressing as they were. But not all things," he raises his eyes too suddenly for Will to avoid and he tries not to flinch. Tries to be more polite about glancing off elsewhere, stacking his utensils as well.

"However," Hannibal continues, "that wasn't precisely the change I've had in mind lately." He moves to stand and begins carrying dishes back to the kitchen.

Will joins him, doing a better job of gathering things after a few more days of healing. Not so hard to balance dishes on his wrists or keep from fumbling glasses.

"This kitchen," Hannibal says, turns to grin over his shoulder as he starts the sink. "I feel so at home
in this kitchen. But, recently, certain deficiencies have come to my attention. This home is, perhaps, too large for one soul. I've made so very many acquaintances, and several of them thanks to my new association with the Bureau, that I've become quite aware of the fact that this kitchen could do with a larger pantry, more space for prep. More space, too, to move around in. More space for more people. Often I have yourself, Alana, Jack and his wife, even Abigail to dinner, and they're eager to participate in the early stages of it. They want to join me and I appreciate it. To my mind, there is truly no better way to become comfortable with another person than to cook and eat with them. Tend to the hearth, as it were.

Will moves some things back into the pantry as he explains. It makes him feel incredibly guilty. He's not talking about Will when he goes on about how his friends help him cook and hang out with him and show up all the time for meals. Will rarely does any of this. And he hasn't helped with assembly at all.

Alana was right to be concerned about Hannibal. For as many people as he seems to have floating in and out of his life, it's not clear that anyone really sticks around and is stable for him.

So when Hannibal concludes: "That's why I was wondering if you wouldn't mind coming with me to assess some new spaces. Look at homes?"

Will says, "Yeah. Definitely. It would be- I'm flattered that you'd care for my opinion."

He gives Will another smile. "Of course. Shall we team up again for the effort?"

"S-sure," he shrugs.

House hunting. Damn. He practically tripped over his own property. How fast is he gonna betray that he's a style-deficit bachelor?

Well.

He looks between Hannibal's relatively casual suit and his own plaid.

Seriously. The good doctor knows exactly what he's getting into.

This should at least be interesting.

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The real estate agent lined up two properties for Hannibal to look at today. Will's coming into it fresh - besides the perceived deficiencies of Hannibal's current house, Will isn't sure what he's looking for in a new one or what his major points of interest will be or why.

They meet the realtor outside of a gate to a home on the opposite end of town. Hannibal introduces Will as "Mr. Graham, a dear friend."

He almost sees Mr. Mesidor come to the conclusion that they're lovers and silently accept it as fact.

Will just blinks at them both because he's not entirely sure what to do with being a "dear" friend when he just learned he was a friend in the first place. He only resolves to put on his glasses and read the realtor's texts over his shoulder, glance at the listing documents whenever he gets a chance. Basically get the dirty details.

When they step inside the property, Mesidor begins his spiel about the features and... Will can't help but just give Hannibal a look.
When he catches on, he only responds with a brow raised in inquiry.

"Hannibal. This is your house."

He looks around for a moment. Turns back to Will. "I beg your pardon?"

Will tosses his hand around, motioning at everything. "It's dark. It's looming. It's big." He points to the two sides of the hall and the rooms beside them. "It's even the same set-up. Just flipped."

Hannibal considers this while Mesidor insists this is a unique property and urges them to come walk the place with him before making any judgments.

They wander as one party to the upper floor and then back down to the kitchen space. Will gives Hannibal a look to say, don't think I need to repeat myself...

Hannibal nods but does, in fact, reserve judgment until they see everything, including the basement and modest back yard. "I have to agree, Mr. Mesidor. It shares many characteristics with my own home. In fact, it is only slightly smaller upstairs and lacks an extra area in the cellar." He pauses to turn and meet his eyes. "I wouldn't wish to waste your time or my own on further consideration of similar properties. Does the next location bear any resemblance?"

Mesidor looks flat-out relieved to have another chance to swing at this one. "None at all, I can assure you. Shall we?"

The second property is a weirdly different extreme. Everything is open and bright.

It was recently renovated and updated. The colors are light and the windows and open concept make everything feel spacious.

The kitchen is massive. Actually too wide, Will can see Hannibal come to that realization at once. "Maybe 'open concept' isn't quite your style?" he skids his fingers in and out of sunlight, touching the counters, playing in the light coming through the blinds.

"Perhaps it is a little too much undefined space," Hannibal agrees. "And it's possible for a kitchen to be too wide; to be too much space to maintain."

Will nods, reaches to span his arms between the left side counter and the island. Four people could comfortably stand side-by-side at almost any point in the kitchen. It's one thing to have space, another entirely when it takes a full 20 full seconds to commute between the fridge and stove, or the prep area and the oven. "Just in theory, though, where would the dining table be?" he tries to encourage Hannibal to at least imagine it.

He exits the kitchen area, hands in his pockets. "A convenient distance. Around here," Hannibal stands beside a sliding glass door.

"Not quite your style either," Will indicates the windows.

Hannibal takes a great inhale. "Perhaps not the fixtures or carpet, no, but these can be adjusted. I must catch myself before I judge a property's merits on my current circumstances, however. An open concept is not an entirely objectionable layout. And there could be some personal growth to attain in choosing a house that doesn't perfectly fit my expectations."

"You should be happy with where you live, though," Mesidor comments. "You did give our agency some broad parameters. It would help to narrow your selection and save you time and travel in the process. You could give me... a few more absolutes, for example. It does help to know that the
kitchen should be larger than your current and smaller than this one."

Will comes to stand beside Hannibal. "What did you think of the rest?"

"Did you judge it within or outside of my style and tastes?" he smiles a bit.

Will considers that. "Better not to tell you. I think you have an incredibly certain grip on the majority of your own tastes, but sometimes you don't catch your own contradictions. So if you tell me why you like or dislike a property, I can tell you why. Maybe you should shop on your instincts and I'll shop with your sense. Maybe you should let go and seek what you want instead of what you've decided you need."

"In that case, I do prefer this house to the previous. Even if you're quite right: It isn't at all to my tastes." He stands a little taller as if he's defying Will to tell him why.

"Of course you do," he shrugs, because it's utterly obvious.

Maybe Hannibal doesn't like being that easy to read. He slides Will a confused look, slowly, then moves to step away. "Of course," he repeats.

"Yeah, because you lied to yourself. You don't want a smaller property, you want one just as big, if not bigger. You like to circle and roam your space, Dr. Lecter. This home is larger than the last in look and... I'm pretty sure in square footage?" He looks to Mesidor who nods.

Hannibal wanders away with his back to them and Mesidor moves to follow. Will lets them go for a moment and slides the back door open to step outside. A small yard. Jesus. He can't even imagine having a fence on any property he owned. Where would the dogs run?

The stream out back of his house runs to a river. He can fix motors and repaint boats and put them out for a fishing trip or two before selling them and starting on the next. He can hike the woods. He could disappear. All of that is within reach of his home. He doesn't think he could live cramped in the city like this. Sharing walls with other people. Closest he ever came was a good five years in the suburbs once, with his father, when he was too young to have carried many memories out of the cookie-cutter existence of bright, tangled, wonderful, hypocritical, happy-sad families.

He wanders up to the fence and toward a rise in the ground that allows him to look over, into the neighbor's yard. The first thing he sees is a doggie door and a few well-gnawed balls strewn around the yard. The second thing he sees is a small marijuana plant in the sunniest spot outside a window. He just laughs to himself.

The crisp outdoors weather doesn't facilitate Hannibal's usual quiet creeping. Will hears him step across the frozen ground. "Look," Will nods, moves aside so he can see over the fence. "I've never heard so much as a bark anywhere in your neighborhood," he comments.

Hannibal seems to think for a long moment before walking back towards the house.

They shake hands with Mesidor and he claims Hannibal's Thursday for a five hour stretch of viewings. He agrees and they begin the drive back.

"Dogs," Dr. Lecter begins.

"Yeah," Will sighs.

"I confess it's an issue of both smell and noise, for my part."
"You a cat person?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "Not much for keeping animals captive at all, actually."

"Never had pets, growing up?"

"My aunt had birds."

"Oh. So you're either one of those whack-o bird people, or-?"

"Not much for pets at all, I'm afraid."

Will considers this. "Nothing captive unless you can eat it."

"I even find the taste and quality of wild and free range game superior to that of caged and farmed animals. Borders, on the whole, have no appeal to me. At least not in the natural world."

Of course. The boundaries of property and propriety are another matter. In civilized society, Hannibal seems to prefer the most controlled among associates, in fact.

Jack.

Alana.

"I was just thinking how I can't even abide a property with fences and yet, here I am. Teaming up with you all over the place."

Hannibal flashes Will a curious glance.

"Just seems strange. I have a feeling I'm not the kind of company you commonly keep," Will shrugs. *A dear friend.*

Hannibal smiles a grin that makes him look... thrilled, toothy and amused. "It is refreshing to encounter a perspective like yours."

Well. That could be because his perspective is, at any given time, someone else's perspective. Or because everyone in the psychiatric community is trying to get a look from inside his skull.

There isn't really that implication with Hannibal, though. He's usually trying to pry Will out from under whomever he's buried himself beneath for the day. Walk him back to the objective, professional overview of events so he can do his job.

But it isn't all business.

They're able to talk to each other on personal and professional levels, both.

Will knows of the boundaries psychologists and psychiatrists are supposed to keep between themselves and their patients. He's not bothered by Hannibal's specific lack of decorum.

Hannibal seems more interested in him, personally, anyway. More, even, than Alana ever feels when he's around her. Will can always feel her restraining something when they're together. More so now than before, of course.

Will blinks at his reflection in the passenger-side window.

It didn't occur to him before now that there might be attraction here but, if he looks for it, he suddenly finds it. Hannibal might be more interested in Will in... several respects.
There's a chance he's reading into things, of course, but Hannibal is more open when it's just the two of them.

Maybe even more *himself* when it's not Jack Crawford, division head, and Alana Bloom, esteemed colleague, in their company.

It's nice not to have titles here, in this strange new place. Nice that he could barge in on Hannibal and say, *I kissed somebody and it went south*, or drop a bomb like *killing a man felt right*. And Hannibal expresses no concern to Jack or Alana about him.

Hannibal takes Will's matters directly back to him. They have a little world all their own.

To be tripping down that line on the spectrum and have himself well-documented and much talked of, Will has had to get used to the idea that people would fucking diagnose him left and right behind his back and walk into every conversation with him with a certain set of assumptions.

It doesn't feel like those assumptions exist with Hannibal. He isn't interested in them.

It really is *refreshing*.

It really does feel like being a *teammate*.

«»

Morning again.

The dogs are getting restless. Tails start wagging and they tap-tap past him to the door, doing circles around him as he fiddles with the circuit board for a boat radar. He usually knows he has to get up and let them out when Eliot comes to sit directly on his feet. That doesn't happen this time. Everybody seems to get more excited all at once. Must be a car coming up the road.

Will waits until he hears a door to lever himself up. He steps into his boots without tying them and leans to look....

It's the Bentley.

That means he has to keep the dogs from rushing the door all at once. Easier said than done.

He edges past them, trying not to step on paws, and pushes wet noses out of the way when they try to wedge past him. But-

Sarah makes a break for it, squeezing out past him, and they all flood out. "Guys! C'mon, don't-" he sighs. They rush to Hannibal, it can't be stopped. "Sorry," he calls, trying to snag a couple of them by the collar. Emma worms away but Winston lets himself get held back.

"It's alright," Hannibal allows them to sniff at his hands and successfully wades through the throng to get to the porch when they don't smell snacks on him. Their tails still thwap him and they nose into his knees. Will whistles to them and grabs a couple of the tennis balls that haven't been destroyed yet. He leads them out into the yard and tosses the first, teases them with the second before chucking it far.

"Sorry," Will repeats when Hannibal makes it over to keep pace with him.

"Not a problem. Quite the welcome committee."

"They recognize you as a Great Bringer of Food, I think."
"My reputation precedes me everywhere," Hannibal muses. "How are your hands? Your wrists?"

He waits to accept one of the balls back from Zeke and tosses it hard. "Better," but he still pushes his sleeves up for the Doctor to inspect.

Hannibal's thumb presses near one spot that is admittedly too raw. He was roughhousing with the dogs and got a nice carpet burn to make his wound worse. "You should put a bandage back on this. Let's handle it before we leave."

"We're leaving?" Will smiles, half a grimace in the glare of the morning sun.

"It's Thursday. I- well, perhaps I shouldn't have assumed."

"Mesidor. You have houses to visit today," he realizes. "I didn't know I was expected. Um. Let me get a jacket?"

"If you're busy, of course, I don't expect you to come. It would simply be a help to me-"

"No, I'm coming. Just- well, you wanna wait inside while I make sure everybody's good for a few hours?"

"Will," Hannibal pauses again like he's gonna let him off the hook. But he drove all the way down here.

"Do we have ten minutes?" Will presses.

Hannibal looks around for a moment. Then nods. Will doesn't waste any more time. He rounds the dogs up, makes sure they do their business. It's the least he can do. He only realized the other day that he hasn't been helping Hannibal in the ways his other friends have been present in his life. And he forgot about the appointment to house-hunt while constructing a new lesson plan.

Hannibal follows him inside when he manages to get all the dogs to follow him back. Until then, he just leaned against the banister and observed them. He saw how Will had to trick Jessie back into the house, how he had to separate Sarah and Eliot who have been snipping at each other lately. Saw him get dirt on his knees stopping to tussle with Winston some. Saw him counting heads because he's got Slick and Rick, two foster kids he's been watching for the week.

"It seems there are more every time I see them."

"Um. There are," Will admits. "Not all of them stick around but I kinda got cornered into working with a rescue group."

He keeps the door open, with the screen door locked, so nobody else tries to set him off on a chase again.

Hannibal waits for an explanation, eyebrow raised.

"Beverly," Will shrugs. They both know that's explanation enough.

He hustles to wash his hands, change his clothes so he doesn't trail his messy little life into Hannibal's car.

The Doctor just... continues to observe.

He doesn't comment until they're driving back toward the highway and Will is folding his glasses
into his front pocket. "The amount of land you live on, the pack you keep. It's in great contrast to the size of your own home. One might expect you to have more square footage so you aren't entirely crammed in."

Will frowns some but takes it in good spirit. "Maybe I'll need you on my team to find a bigger place one day."

"No intentions of expanding the homestead to make room for human companions?"

He laughs a breath. "Like who? I think we both know several reasons why dating is off the table. You saw a big reason hollowed out in my fireplace."

"Alana stood there and listened to your fears for an animal and kissed you."

"I... think I kissed her." If that even matters.

"Beverly knew of your dogs and supported your... habit. Encouraged you to take more in."

"Habit," Will tastes the word for a while.

"Beverly is single," Hannibal mentions.

"Beverly is too smart to get involved with me," Will smiles. "She spotted that I don't build social support systems and so she just... encouraged me to expand the only support I'll take. I mean she didn't say that, but that's what it meant and she wasn't wrong," Will allows. "It's fine. We're fine with where we are." He chews his lip for a moment before he admits, "Alana and I are fine where we are, too." He has to say the words to make them true. Inhales big and exhales. "Even if she did feel like I was in a good place right now, I still wouldn't stand as a rock to her. Stability is a pillar of intimate relationships for her." He shrugs. "For most people. And she can be stable for me, but," he rubs his eyes. "She knows I wouldn't ever be a rock for her. I don't know how to be one."

Hannibal absorbs this and licks his lips before he objects. "Wait for her, Will."

"You think her standards will fall?" he laughs, shaking his head.

"All relationships are built on more than one pillar. And if you may not stand as a rock in her eyes, perhaps her sight will change. You're a rock to your dogs. You are the very foundation of Jack's current rounds of investigation." He's silent in the wake of that, like he didn't say all he meant to. Will can see him resolve himself before he goes on. "You often speak of feeling as if you are at sea. Alone and at peace there. I, myself, sometimes feel like I'm rolling on the distant waves but your light falls on me and I am known. It's comforting to me to be discovered in such a way. You seem to me a lighthouse atop a bluff. Not the rocks below where I may be dashed, but the lone sentinel exposing who we are in the dark."

Jesus. Will blinks at the road. At the dashboard. At the passing trees.

How could he have known Hannibal thinks that much of him? He thought they were just... shoved together in a way, as surviving observers of Garret Jacob Hobbs's last living acts. Will hasn't even been doing well at what is arguably his job in helping with Abigail. Hannibal has taken up responsibilities with her but Will hasn't. Hannibal respects his opinion and treats him as a friend. He doesn't comment on Will's inability to feel... human around her. Hannibal only supports him.

More than that.

Like here he is encouraging Will not to give up, to see what happens with Alana even if it seems like
there's no chance. He gives Will reasons to credit himself.

Oh, hell. It's like Hannibal is trying to be family to him and he hasn't even noticed. It's just! It's just not something he does. What the fuck.

Well. It's time to get the hell over himself in this respect at least. He may not be comfortable with the institution of family, but Hannibal is reaching out to him. He can learn to reach back.

Will still sounds as dazed as he is when he murmurs, "I'm glad I can be that for you. Thanks."

And he's gonna take this house hunt a lot more seriously.

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Mr. Mesidor has several places in town for Hannibal to check out. The first is an open house. They're to contact him when they arrive so he can drive over there and guide them to the next property.

There are four other vehicles parked close on the street when they get there. Because of Hannibal's patience for Will, they arrive half an hour after Mesidor had planned but that doesn't seem to bother Hannibal much. They're handed champagne when they walk in and the house smells clean, lemon-scoured and sparkling.

"Marble," is the first thing Will says, though he's wanted to say it in the past three rooms, too.

Hannibal nods. "More than the façade of Giotto's Campanile, I'd wager."

"It's kind of..." Will hesitates but Hannibal pauses in the master bedroom and waits while he looks over his shoulder to make sure no one else is near. "Tasteless."

"More so than the middling champagne," Hannibal agrees, not modulating his voice at all. "Shall we even bother to see if the kitchen has workable bones?"

"I mean... overall I don't trust the structure enough to think the skeleton of the kitchen would make this place feel any more alive. I don't really know what it is," he shrugs.

"Well. I trust our instincts combined, so I believe we should pass."

"Pass," Will agrees. He holds out his hand for Hannibal's champagne flute and he gives it over, though with a quizzical look. Will pours both glasses out in the master bathroom sink and leaves them there. There's a door to the back deck, seemingly for easy access to the jacuzzi, covered up for the season. The yard is miniscule. Almost claustrophobic.

He holds the back gate open and walks out behind Hannibal. He's kind enough not to mention how very avoidant that maneuver was.

Mesidor pulls up soon after and asks how they liked everything.

Hannibal's look should be reprimand enough but Mesidor presses, "Not even as a possible reno property?"

"If we pulled all the marble out to renovate the place I feel like the foundation would float up six inches," Will doesn't look to Mesidor or Hannibal when he says it; he doesn't get satisfaction from his own snot-nosed quips. It's more about warning Mesidor to shape up and stop wasting Hannibal's time.
"A certain amount of updating would be expected," Hannibal says. "This would be... not worth the effort, I think."

"Well. If you'll allow me - I have keys to several other properties. Shall we?"

Will is staring down the block at someone jogging in place, waiting for cars to clear the intersection. He feels Hannibal touch his elbow and nods, moves to the car with him.

The next property has sort of the exact opposite problem. It's not ostentatious and it has been recently updated. But instead of being weighed down by opulence and stone, it seems to be light on style. There are windows that open up to a gorgeous yard and lots of space but... that's about it. The ceilings have been brought down too low, the walls are white and stale, the cabinets and fixtures are generic. It's as big as Hannibal's place, and in an expensive neighborhood, but it feels like suburbs pre-fab.

The only thing unique about it are the steps everywhere. Though, rather than lending it a divided feel, it seems like it could get annoying.

"Wouldn't work for your dinners. Your... parties and stuff," Will shrugs when Mesidor finally gives them some space. "I mean after two glasses of wine, every person in heels is in danger of rolling an ankle and suing you for it."

Hannibal smiles and blinks around as if he hadn't thought of it exactly that way. "I was feeling closed in by the ceilings but that is certainly a heavier negative. I wouldn't wish to be a danger to my friends."

They let Mesidor show them to the back, where the property runs right up against a really beautiful little dark thatch of woods which makes Will nearly regret his quick dismissal. But really, it's not enough of a redeeming quality. And probably less of one to Hannibal.

The third property of the day is... stunning. There's no doubt about it. It's colonial and seems much lighter than all the other places have been so far. That seems mostly a result of closely-spaced windows packed onto the walls of rooms that would otherwise betray their small dimensions. There isn't a lot of square footage. This is a clear downside to Hannibal who frowns at the spaces, the lack of a proper basement and entryway, but the kitchen is almost precisely what he's been looking for. Will can tell by the way he pauses at the entryway.

Mesidor stepped in front of them to rattle off the features and Hannibal stays stuck at the threshold as if he's unworthy of entering the place. The cabinets are fronted with elegantly detailed glass, both framed and carved with fine patterns. There's a feature set into the ceiling above, white tiles with more subtle patterns. White on white everywhere except the pitch black accents of handles, knobs, appliances, and even tile grout that works to stunning effect. They arrived at the perfect time of day for afternoon light to pour down on the counters and into the wide sinks. There are copper pots hanging from hooks and racks. Pristine, clearly never been used. The house feels lived-in, though only just. But the kitchen was built for a cook who... obviously doesn't live there. There are no scuffs on the counters or water spots on the appliances. He would mistake it for pristine, well-kept like Hannibal's kitchen, only the pans aren't dented or stained, there's a fine layer of dust on the handles.

Will feels compelled to follow the curve of designs on the cabinets with his fingers. Behind them sits crystal and fine china, well-illuminated in the afternoon even without the lights flipped on in the case itself.

The realtor is talking about how the price may sound steep for the square footage of the house but the updates more than compensate-- Hannibal still hasn't moved. And before he does he says, "Mr.
Mesidor. Will you excuse us?"

All three of them stop in their tracks. Then Will and Hannibal wait for him to vacate the kitchen. He steps out, and down the hall. They listen to his footsteps recede.

Hannibal slowly enters. He prowls the kitchen around the central island, until he comes to a stop next to Will. They admire the pieces in the cabinet.

"It's um. The nicest yet. I mean. It almost fits you."

"Almost," Hannibal agrees. He seems to sit inside the feeling for a long moment before moving around Will and to the sink. The windows, sadly, don't look out on much. A fence. An outside seating area.

Will comes to stand next to him and exactly what Hannibal is experiencing here is flowing through him.

It's elegant. It's very much to his tastes. He's a bit disappointed because it's not all he wants. Not enough aspects of the home are fitting for him. And that's a shame, as the kitchen is so clearly suited to his needs.

Hannibal falls for the functions of a space at the same time as the aesthetics. And that didn't happen in the same breath. This house could work. But it's not going to make him completely comfortable.

Will concentrates on him and sympathizes. "Hannibal. At least we have something for the short list? I know it's lacking a little," he shrugs, "but it's a step in the right direction." He leans back to settle next to him a bit more, warm up against his side. "So we go back to Mesidor, tell him he did a good job, but we need this house only with more space."

"And a proper basement. Not so close to the neighbors."

"Exactly. So we're just three factors away from the right place. Come here." He leads Hannibal to the range. "Turn it on," he points to the stove.

As he expected, he gets a strange look.

"Turn it on," Will repeats.

Hannibal reaches to turn the front burner on, select the temperature. He looks up and pulls down a copper sauce pan. He blows the dust from it and sets it on the burner.

Will waits for him to look around, pull out drawers. He doesn't find the tools he's looking for, though, with such a spare selection, most of it for show. But his hands know right where everything should go. He could feel comfortable here.

There's a block of knives. Hannibal runs his fingers over the counter and finds no nicks or slices. He turns on and off overhead lights. Then he stations himself in front of the stove again. He looks either way. Stares at the backsplash for a moment.

Clicks the stove back off.

He feels better for some reason. Will can read it on him.

"There's a beautiful set of windows and a gorgeous, unused kitchen. Still I would spend much of my time staring at the tiles on the wall as I cooked."
Will grins. "Not as perfect as it looked, then."

Hannibal looks around. Then nods minutely. "I'm thankful for the additional perspective," he finally meets Will's eyes and he doesn't have to look away.

Will nods, tips an invisible cap.

"Let's move on, shall we?" Hannibal motions for Will to step ahead of him.

Mesidor takes them to three more homes.

All of them are about as good as the colonial but, being in more popular areas, they lack space in a similar way.

The final lot is just property. There was a structure there last year, but all that sits here now is a sign for the development company and a foundation.

"I thought it appropriate to remind you that more options become available as properties are built from the ground, up," Mesidor says, pulling up caution tape and directing them towards what remains of the brick walkway. He shows them the property lines and emphasizes that they might make the most of the area by building up, instead of out.

But there the foundation sits, already poured, "And alas, no cellar." Hannibal smiles. And Mesidor doesn't protest by saying it's graded for one. After a pause Hannibal holds out his hand and shakes with the realtor. "Mr. Mesidor, may I contact your office later with further specifications?"

"Of course, Dr. Lecter. Let me know when you and your partner will have scheduled time to visit more properties. Mr. Graham," he reaches to shake Will's hand, too, and... Will decides to be a good sport about it. "I know there's a lot of footwork," he looks to Will's droop with some sympathy. "Are you both sure you don't need me to place an offer for the second house? As you know, it's best to play ball as soon as you can with the market moving this fast."

"We're not prepared for that yet, and,... if it remains on the market I might need to know what underlying matters would give others pause," Hannibal smiles. "We're quite sure. I'll leave word with your assistant within the day. Good afternoon." He's firm about it, and turns to direct Will back to the street.

Goddamn he's fucking hungry. He's almost instantly disappointed in himself for looking to Hannibal, hoping he'll get invited to lunch. He's such a moocher.

"Do you have anything pressing?" Hannibal asks.

"No, you?"

"I had hoped to borrow you for another hour, perhaps. To discuss where I might direct the agency to search next-"

"No problem," Will says too soon.

Hannibal smiles, opens the car door for him. "There will be a meal for your troubles," he adds, knowing full well that Will is exhausted, starving, and completely at his mercy.

"If I'm chopping carrots or something, I'm warning you that half of them are likely to go missing before they end up in the pan."
"Your threat has been noted."

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*Quelle horreur*, Dr. Lecter actually keeps sandwich meats. Will really thought he was above all that.

The bread was made by hand (of course), the accompanying soup they're throwing together right now (of course) -- and Will does have to chop the carrots, but Hannibal splits a sandwich of "cured, cold meats" with Will as they make dumpling soup.

He is extremely self-conscious of his imprecise angles and uneven cuts, but if something needs an additional chop, Hannibal simply does it himself, without comment. He genuinely just seems pleased to finally have Will's elbow bumping into his in the kitchen.

Hannibal determines that Will should drink, practically *recommending it as his doctor*, and slides him a glass of red wine. He has one, too, but nurses it slowly.

"I didn't realize what I was missing," Will tips his glass to him when they're nearly through. "I usually... slave and fumble and sweat in the kitchen when I'm trying to make anything other than, you know. Burgers. But this was nice," he allows. "Thanks."

The chef smiles, small and pleased and clinks their glasses. "Thank you for giving it the chance, at last. Would you care to sit? I'll bring everything out in a moment."

"Can I take anything over for you?"

"The wine? And my glass, as well, if you will."

Once settled, Will has two frankly spectacular portions and doesn't feel like a pig about it at all. It's amazing. He hopes that isn't ego, just enhancing the meal by dint of getting off his ass for once. He's actually pleased with himself in a few ways. One he dare not express - that Mesidor looked to them both when asking for a financial decision today. And Hannibal? He included Will, too. It was unquestionable.

He's getting the damn warm-fuzzies from everything today. At least some of it must be the wine.

"I had an interesting time today," Hannibal finally gets to the point after a while. "I learned more about myself through you. This experience is useful, if not exactly flattering."

Will blinks. "Didn't mean to dent your self-esteem."

"It's not that," Hannibal shakes his head as he pours water for himself from a carafe. "I didn't know my own understanding of my tastes would be muddied by examination. Lucky I had you with me to remove me from the role of observer and put me in front of that stove. I find a startling amount of my own insights must first be filtered through you for clarity."

"Hmm," Will sips his wine. He has a vision of Hannibal cranking him like the flour sifter he'd prepped with. Maybe he should feel used, but finally being *of use* to Hannibal still feels rather remarkable for Will. "Do you know what you're going to ask Mesidor for next?"

"Mostly. But I wanted your insights before I committed him to the next leg of the search."

Will nods. "Well, unless you expect to have to make modifications, regardless of which property you pick, you might want to get specific on what's useful to you in your kitchen and what needs to change. If the stove can't be facing a wall 'cause it'll drive you nuts staring at it-"
"That's not precisely what I mean," Hannibal dabs his lips with a napkin and starts setting things aside. "While that is helpful, I have yet to ask how the properties made you feel, without respect to the perspectives you intuit from assessing them through my eyes. Specifically, Will, how would you feel living in the colonial?"

Geeze. He pushes his bowl back and shifts in his seat, leaning back a little and thumbing at the stem of the wine glass. "I mean. None of these places are anything I'd shop for. Not that I," he blows out a steadying breath, "not that I mean that as commentary on your tastes, it's just that you and I look for different functions in a home."

"Obviously. Only, your home now, though suited to basic needs, is hardly ideal. Especially taking into consideration the limits of the structure and your pack's use of it. The land is wider than you need it to be."

Will nods, allowing that. Even if he likes it that way.

"And you sleep in the same room with all your dogs. Only three main areas exist in your home - the front room, doubling as a bedroom; the office, bathroom, and laundry area in the middle, and up the stairs; and the kitchen and dining area toward the back. No private sleeping space, no updates to the kitchen. Are these choices? Lack of interest? Lack of options? If you found yourself with a partner in life who had preferred the colonial, how would you bear living there?"

"I think... well enough. I mean. It's big. But. The yard."

"Was small. As has been the case with each residence we've visited."

Will scratches his head, a bit hung up on the point. Just because Hannibal invited him on the hunt doesn’t mean he's gonna be sharing his space. He wonders if the threads are getting crossed here somewhere or he’s missing out on a conversation they had and he forgot because his brain is still going haywire.

They're not together. Will's ability to survive in a space hardly means anything in these circumstances.

"I guess? I mean. Not that it matters but. I could deal with it," he shrugs. "It would be hard to have the dogs there. We'd have to find a park to walk to. And I don't know what I'd do with all the rest of that space, but it wouldn't be torture." He laughs. "Worst thing about living in a damn mansion is all the stairs, I imagine."

Hannibal smiles some. "Room outside might remedy the lack of space inside, for you."

"I mean it might," he shrugs again. "Does it really matter?"

Hannibal wavers, "I'm interested in both our points of view, not just two of my own."

That comes kinda close to calling Will a mirror in a way that stings. He was asked to help. He has been.

Maybe he's... taking that in the wrong spirit. But he just wouldn't look for the kind of thing Hannibal would in a house. Fuck it - Will has a house. He doesn't need to look. He doesn't want to. He knows how much footwork it takes to spend this kind of money. This isn't his job. "I, um." He tosses the last of his wine back. "I need to get back to the dogs. If you don't mind."

Hannibal is still for a long moment. Then he rises and begins gathering dishes. "Would you care to take the rest of the soup?"
Yeah. Lunchmeats he may do, but not leftovers. Might as well not waste it.

The drive back to Will's house is quiet. He has enough time to sit and feel stupid for switching off and abruptly ending their conversation. But he's misreading Hannibal's angle here and remembering their earlier conversation on the way to the open house is only making him doubt more. Hannibal is treating him like he's a part of the process. Like he won't disappear back to Wolf Trap once Hannibal is all unpacked in his new home. Sure he's looking for a place to better accommodate his friends, but Will was a crappy friend to start with and, as this proves, he becomes more of a doppelganger than a friend when he's absorbed in activity with Hannibal, anyway.

"I don't have much free time coming up. They don't do holiday breaks at the Academy. You'll probably be slogging through the rest of the properties on your own."

Hannibal's head ticks up in acknowledgement, but not agreement. "Your threat has been noted," he repeats when he pulls to a stop outside the house. It rattles a laugh out of Will. "Back to my empty kitchen, then. And my offices. Until my teammate comes to his senses and recognizes what a dreadful tragedy he would resign me to in wasting money on the wrong house."

"Oooh. Come on."

"If you do find yourself with time, contact me. Otherwise, I'll see you at our next session."

"Mmm. 7:30 Monday. 24-hour cancellation policy," Will dutifully recites.

Hannibal puts the car in park and motions to Will. He's confused. "Wrists?"

"Oh," he stretches his arm out even as he says, "They're fine."

"Will. Do not hesitate to call on me when things aren't fine." He finishes checking under the bandages, then keeps a solid, warm grip on his wrists. It's strange and almost comforting. "Please tell me you will."

"Um. Okay. Yeah. Thanks."

«»

Maybe that's all his brain remembers.

Hannibal touching his wrists so carefully and securing an assurance from Will that he'll go to Hannibal if he really needs him.

Maybe he remembers that, on the beach in Grafton, West Virginia, as he recites his kills- NO, the kills on the totem pole, and at some point he rubs at his wrists and--

It's kind of a breathtaking shock to find himself in Hannibal's waiting room. He is greeted with surprise and some pleasure by the Doctor's voice and he turns to him-

Hannibal reads the shock and horror on his face right away. And ushers Will back into the office.

Will's rattled, hard. He's trying to figure out what the fuck his head just did to him and Hannibal is- Hannibal is not helpful. There is something wrong with him.

There's something wrong with him.

Brains don't just skip like records unless it's... tumors, brain damage- something. SOMETHING.
"You are disassociating, Will. It's a desperate survival mechanism for a psyche that endures repeated abuse."

No no no no no no no, "No no I am not abused."

"You have an empathy disorder, what you feel is overwhelming you."

"I know I know I know."

"Yet you choose to ignore it."

This isn't happening.

"That's the abuse I'm referring to."

"What- what do you want me to quit?" It's fucking absurd it's his job and he's good at it. Practically made for it. He closes cases.

"Well, Jack Crawford gave you a chance to quit and you didn't take it. Why?"

"I. Save. Lives." That's obvious. Not enough lives, maybe. He couldn't keep Abigail talking to her father through the prison bars, but he does save lives. He ended Hobbs before he could take more girls. (Not that his fucking copycat made that really count for anythin-- you know what? No.)

"And that feels good?"

Jesus. "Generally speaking, yeah."

"What about your life?"

Will just looks at him.

"I'm your friend, Will, I don't care about the lives you save, I care about your life."

His kneejerk reaction is to reject that.

Of course a physician would say so. A doctor.

But it doesn't add up. He saved Abigail. She means a lot to both of them.

And he.

He gets stuck on the point. His brain isn't cooperating (clearly) and it's not replaying what he just heard for him.

Only, after Budge, after seeing Hannibal's relief when he showed up alive.

After getting comfortable in Hannibal's skin and learning what he looks for in a home.

After sharing Hannibal's kitchen with him, stealing his vegetables and watching his sharp hands craft things he loves.

It feels.

Almost absurd to think he, Will, is a... life worth caring about.

Yet, here they are.

"And your life is separating from reality," Hannibal lays it out, plain as day.

Will wants to believe this is... damage. Physical damage of some kind. That would be so clean-cut.
So clear.

It wouldn't be the dark mire of mental illness.

It wouldn't be what he fears Hannibal is seeing in him, now.

"I've been sleepwalking. I'm experiencing hallucinations." He feels unstable, yes. But he made it this far in life, this far in his career. To think that Jack Crawford is the one tipping him over the edge is... almost. Almost. It's not possible; it's not right. Jack of all people knows how these things work in a mind like Will's. If Will were losing it, his phone would be filled with messages and texts. There would have been a State Trooper following him here. He would have awoken in a straitjacket in a cushy facility, not on his own in a place only he knows is comforting to himself. "Maybe I should get a brain scan."

"Will," Hannibal nearly snaps, "stop looking in the wrong corner for an answer to this."

Desperate as Will is, afraid as he is, the emotional environment around him is also clear to him. Crystal. (Like usual.) And Hannibal doesn't lose his temper with Will like this. This isn't anger. It's fear.

He's scared, too. Scared for Will and desperate to get the words into his head. Stuff them down his throat.

He considers Will his friend. Hannibal's professionalism forces him back into business mode and he asks about the case.

Will suddenly remembers being in here before. After Budge. And helping Hannibal limp down to his car.

He remembers coming back up here. He remembers how Jack didn't ask if Hannibal went with one of the medics or if he went to the hospital at all.

That is Jack.

This is Hannibal. Saying, "Will," again, concernedly drawing his attention back up and engaging him on the case.

This is Will. He is Will. An academic and the afflicted both.

He knows what this is. Knowing and accepting are two different things, yes. But he does know.

He knows that Hannibal is his friend. So he will take him to a doctor. Hannibal will sit with him and go over his test results with the neurologist if Will asks him to. Or he will step from the room and let the doctor tell Will what he found. He'll give help; he'll give privacy.

And when the doctor finds nothing, Will will have to come back to this room, Hannibal's office, to remember.

Or he can decide to accept it, now. What Hannibal has been speaking as loudly as he dares.

What even Jack knows but requests he forget.

"You said West Virginia," Hannibal is still trying to coax an answer out of him. Still trying to help him work it out.

Will scrubs his hand over his face and can't unsee the totem.
Can't unsee Hobbs.

And he's afraid every time he opens his eyes back up that he'll be standing on a freeway or a balcony or with a knife to Abigail's neck.

Will nods, but not for the reason Hannibal thinks. "And the case?" he tries to prompt.

"I... think you're right," rattles out of him on a breath.

Hannibal looms over him and Will can't look up to meet his eyes. Sensing this, Hannibal comes closer and drops to a crouch. He's quiet and observes Will for a moment while he looks into his palms for no reason other than that he can't meet his friend's eyes.

Knowing that he's a danger even to Hannibal, but all Hannibal still ever wants to do is help.

Those two officers would be alive if Will hadn't hallucinated a sound.
Hannibal wouldn't have had to watch his patient die.
He wouldn't have had to bloody his hands with Budge's death.

"Maybe I need help?" it comes out of him on a dry, hollow sob.

Entire hours of his life he'll never know the contents of, now. Dangerous to drive so far and... he could have ended up anywhere. How does he know he didn't hurt anyone on his way here?

He's almost ready to laugh at himself because, shit, he'd feel guilty if his sleepwalking lead him to so much as step on one of the pup's tails. And here he is, he could have run someone over on the highway on his way back and he wouldn't even know it.

Could have ended up in that waiting room to simply shoot Hannibal and walk away.

God.

Hannibal closes Will's palms together, warm in his own hands. "I don't want you to wake up and find-"

"I know." Yes. He knows.

"Or not wake up. Because you unknowingly put yourself in danger."

Will can only breathe, a wet inhale, and nod.

"Do you want my help? Do you want me to... act on your behalf in finding another psy-"

"No. I can't-- You. I can't-- I don't know if I can handle anybody else. I- I don't feel--" he sniffs back and clears his throat. It isn't easy for anyone to admit this. "I don't feel like I have to act like I'm okay with you. Think you may have already figured me out," he gives a breath of a laugh and a watery smile.

Hannibal nods but his own smile is slow. He moves to sit next to Will and, slowly, all movements broadcasted and clear, moves his arm around him. Clamps his hand around Will's side.

He's strong. Supportive.

And it feels like his grip replaces some kind of... bind, some... fucking girdle that was keeping his crazy in and his spine straight. Not that he feels serial killers and disturbed personalities suddenly pouring out of his head. Instead it feels like he was making some *Death of A Salesman* sort of
attempt to save face and here, with Hannibal and his steel and reserve and knowledge and friendship at Will's side, he doesn't have to anymore.

A dam breaks. He feels weary and tired. Cold and sleep-deprived. Feverish, nauseous, almost like he's sick. Like he was coming down with something and didn't want to acknowledge it. Like he needed the paycheck too bad to concern himself with his own health.

And that's obviously not what it was. He doesn't feel any less like people need him. Not any less like he was doing good in the world. Not any less like he saves lives.

Only, the danger of becoming someone Jack would need to *stop* honestly looms too large for him to ignore any longer.

He's terrifying himself and Hannibal is the only one who stopped to look. To *see*.

Will curls in on himself and the sobs come so hard it *hurts*. He feels Hannibal's cheek rest on his shoulder and he lets him grip his hand, hold and sway his body with the other.

How do you ask for help and survive? How do you power through this as an individual and keep standing on your own?

He wants to know so bad. He wants to be strong enough to look this in the face and shrug and keep working. But if he just.

If he just lets Hannibal take his hand. Is that so bad?

Who can he possibly save face in front of, now? Not Alana. And Hannibal has probably been right all along - Jack was just getting while the gettin' was good. As soon as the fruit is spoiled, he'll just go shopping again. Jack's got a campus full of geniuses in the making and feelers out in every psychology department worth a damn across the nation.

He has Alana. He has Chilton. He has Hannibal. He has access to other minds that wouldn't collapse so easily under the weight of this.

Hannibal moves against him and draws him to sit straight, thumbs the tears away from his face and doesn't blink at him like Will's become broken and pitiful right before his eyes. This is another frustrating day with his friend Will Graham and he's ready for it, like he'd be ready for more intellectual abuse from Will when Mesidor shows them another absurdly large home with zero yard space.

"Your hands are freezing," he comments. "Your face is clammy. I need to see you home. I think we'll leave your car for now. Perhaps you should call me for a ride, regardless, for the time being."

He doesn't know. Will doesn't know.

He's been making the wrong decisions for so long and who knows how many fucking semi-trucks he might have run off the road, utterly unaware of himself.

Fuck.

He just nods. He just stands when Hannibal helps him. Watches him retrieve his bag and jacket.

"Unfortunately, I've an appointment at four. Not quite long enough for lunch and a two-way trip. So, Will. I'd like you to rest at my house. And I think you should leave your phone here."
For when Jack calls. Because he will.
He'll whistle and Will would come running.

Will licks his lip and digs in his pocket. He doesn't look at the screen, just hands it over.

Hannibal puts it on his desk, dead-center.

He feels like he ought to lecture him on not saying anything to Jack, considering Hannibal isn't exactly feeling generous about Agent Crawford's behavior, but.

Somehow everydamn decision he makes is suddenly wrong. Ill-informed and made under duress. Or a result of.

A sickness.

This thick sickness he feels flushing his skin, despite the chill in his fingers. It's dragging him down like weights set on his shoulders.

He has a used tissue in his pocket but it feels impolite to use it on his nose here, in front of Hannibal.

He reaches to snag a new one from a shelf and Hannibal waits while he turns away to wipe up his face and tucks it into his pocket, too.

Then he shows Will out. Back through the waiting room and to the Bentley.

Then home.
Hannibal doesn't want him to help with lunch, and he would probably feel less shaky sitting down, but he can stir a damn pot. He can stand by the stove and warm his hands and concentrate on little else.

Every time Will blinks, he is looking up at the totem and icy wind off the water slices at the back of his neck. He finches at the feeling of thick blood flecking his face. But Hannibal stations himself next to Will, thin-slicing things and busily chopping, mashing, mixing... juicing. Whatever else. He explains the steps and Will can't hang on to the timeline or the words. He takes up the wooden spoon and stirs the noodles in their bubbling water. He puts it down and lets the rhythm of Dr. Lecter's speech wash over him.

The pot is warming and the body near his is warming and the knowledge that he can stand here and make himself at least minimally useful, even when he feels weak and broken, is warming, too.

Hannibal slices a tomato, fresh and glistening, salts it with a dash and hands it to him.

This isn't Will's idea of a tasty snack, but Hannibal is saying something about appreciating pure things for what they are. Fruit of the vine. Salt of the earth.

Will changes his focus to the taste, consistency, burst of flavor, texture. He appreciates this, thin skinned, wet, and red, for exactly what it is.

Hannibal smiles at him. He points to the pot.
Will gives it a stir.

Lunch is deceptively simple for how much work Hannibal puts into it. Sauces from scratch, sausage he says he hunted all around town for, far and wide, vegetables lightly cooked so they can be appreciated near enough to their natural state.

Every plate is beautiful. A composed gift for the eye and the palate. Water and then coffee. A quiet meal while Will mourns his missing hours and learns to accept the control he has just decided to hand to Hannibal.

It's hard to accept a vulnerability as it sits, naked and exposed between them like this.

It's a strange mercy that Hannibal isn't treating this as a normal moment in time. And he isn't handling Will like the fine china either.

They both know what he's giving over, here. It makes him feel lucky, when he thinks about it. If he didn't have Dr. Lecter at that moment, he would have plowed forward until he broke. Or if Hannibal was just his colleague and not his friend, and Will had still asked, he might just be helping him pack clothes for an extended stay at an inpatient facility right now.

"There is a landline, in the study, if you need reach me. I may not be able to answer immediately, during appointments-"

Will nods. "I, um. Don't know your number by heart."

"I'll write it down. And I'll return before eight. There's a package I must retrieve and then you can decide if it would be best to drive home. Perhaps you should rest, until then."
He nods again and doesn't quite know what to say. He feels like a burden, needing to be driven around. Hannibal reaches to touch his shoulder and then-

He feels the plap of a drop of blood hit his neck and begin an icy slide downward and upon opening his eyes, he's standing in the study-
Alone-
In front of the phone-

A piece of paper is crunched in his palm. He opens it and flattens it out to see Hannibal's flawless handwriting. Two numbers, cell and office.

Will's breathing is jacked again. He watches his hands shake. And he tries not to knock things over turning a desk clock to find--

He's lost about an hour and a half. Hannibal's appointment started at... four? So, an hour ago. The clock falls from his numb fingers and he fumbles for it, trying to right it before it breaks.

Hannibal would have left a minimum of 75 minutes ago.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

He takes the phone handset and stumbles to the leather couch. He sets the phone and paper aside to drop his head into his hands and moan and claw at his hair and panic in the quiet.

Jesus. This is-
He might have been in class at Quantico by now. It's a good thing he wasn't in front of a room full of trainees.

He pries his eyes open to look at his hands. No blood. No bruising. No scratches. No evidence that he's used them to harm Hannibal. He doesn't need to go downstairs to check if he left a body but he.... kinda does.

He fumbles for the phone again but realizes a half hour couldn't possibly have been long enough for-

The handset rings in his hands and he tries not to laugh like a goddamn hysterical.

He presses the green button. *"Could you feel me panicking or something?"* he tries for a light tone but it comes out totally strained.

Hannibal is hesitant to answer. *"You left a message,"* he replies after a long beat.

Holy fuck. Will gulps loud enough that he probably hears it down the line. *"What did, uh. What did I say?"*

*"You asked me to feed your dogs for you. Will, did-"


Hannibal is quiet for a moment. *"Would you like me to ask Alana to-"

*"No. God, please no. I can't- she's already handling my classes and I'm already inflicting myself on you. I can't imagine-"

*"You are not inflicting yourself on anyone. Will, may I request something of you?"*
He rubs at his eyes. "Of course. Least I can do. As long as it doesn't involve knives," he tries to joke.

"Take the handset with you and go to the kitchen. There's a spiral-bound volume propped up between two jars." He pauses. "Go ahead."

Will takes a thin breath. Then another and it's a bit more centering. After that he can heft himself up and head downstairs.

He goes to the kitchen, left dim, only the remains of an early winter sunset filtering through the back door to illuminate it. The book is spiral-bound, folded open to a recipe it would seem Hannibal wanted to work on.

"Okay," Will says.

"Read from the beginning. Sit in the quiet and let yourself focus on something inconsequential. Decide whether to learn it or not. If you do, focus on what you can teach me about it. I've only skimmed it so far and am interested, but haven't had the time to invest in experiments... or... the means."

The means? Will's wondered, before, what you even buy for the man who has - or can afford - everything, and all he keeps showing up with is middling reds from obscure vineyards.

He flips the book to the cover.
It's a cannabis cookbook.

That startles a laugh out of him.

"Um. You... don't have the means? I... know a couple dealers in the DC Metro area," he laughs again, still a strain too high. "Maybe an evidence lock-up we can 'borrow' from."

"The next culinary revolution will involve not just the effects of legalized and medicinal cannabis, but the variety of tastes and smells of different strains. And masking those, as well, when the herb overpowers the rest of the meal. I've been informed of this emerging trend but I don't yet understand the specifics. Perhaps we can learn together. I doubt this is a topic you've ever considered," he searches.

"No. I haven't," Will admits, rubbing at his neck. "Um. I guess I'll give it a try?"

"It's something else to focus on, in the absence of Jack and his cases. I know your mind will want to turn back to that soon enough. Will - I think it's time you resisted that urge."

The urge. Like it's some habit. Like he's an addict.

Okay. The... two puff chump will make his best attempt at focusing on culinary marijuana. You know, it's so far out into left field, it might just work. Might be distracting enough.

"We can discuss and fill in your missing minutes when I return. Will, please take this time to breathe. Relax, if you can. And if not, perhaps begin exploring short-term goals. Healthier directions to move in."

He flips through the book pages. Healthier directions. "You think there's a granola recipe in here? Maybe cannabis oil infused kale? Chronic quinoa?" his humor comes out thin and they both know it, but Hannibal's voice smiles for him.

"Let me know, if so. I find you to be an excellent teammate and we may strike out on less-than-legal
adventures in time. Who knows?"

Teammates. They're teammates. Will keeps.... honestly he keeps forgetting about that. Forgetting they're friends and something... more absorbing than that.

"Until eight?" he asks.

"Until eight."

Maybe reality will cut out again and the time will fly by. Not that he's hoping for that, but he might actually not be as disappointed in himself if it did.

«»

Hannibal comes home to find Will at the dining table, glasses on, and the book spread out in front of him. He's been nervously draining and refilling a glass of water and trying to concentrate little by little. He's been fidgeting so much. He's been up to pee like four times since the phone call.

But he hasn't lost any more time.

"Will?" Hannibal sets his bag down and shrugs off his coat. "How do you feel?"

Will nods. "Um. Alright. I mean. Messed up but alright. If that makes any sense."

Hannibal frowns slightly but goes to hang his jacket up and returns to take his standard seat at the head of the table. Will avoids his eyes successfully for another long minute, acting as if he's finishing up the page he's on.

He removes his glasses. Places them on the book. Waits.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Hannibal prompts.

Will clears his throat. "We were finishing up our meal and you said... you had to pick up a package. You'd leave the phone number for your office."

Hannibal is careful to remain neutral. "You continued to converse with me, though sparingly. You followed me upstairs. I wrote down the numbers and you mentioned that you realized something. Do you remember any of this? Even flashes? Single, misplaced words? Feelings?"

It is utterly blank. Not a single word or notion. It's a complete timejump for him. "What did I... 'realize'?"

Hannibal hesitates. "I'm not entirely sure I should effectively put your words back into your mouth."

"Well. They are my words. Maybe I'd like them back," he thumbs at the arm of his glasses.

Another moment goes by. "You said that you realized I was reaching out to you for help in house hunting and you thought I was making it a point to show you that there's no need to make decisions on your own any longer. That you had been alone, at sea, for long enough."

The things Hannibal said in the car that day have hooked in his brain, that's for sure. If Will is the lighthouse, like Hannibal says he is, instead of dark and alone out on the waves, maybe he needs someone to help him tend the tower.

Maybe that was his head continuing to call out for help when Will couldn't do it himself.
While he balks at the idea of handing Hannibal so much power over himself, he's starting to think that the *wisest* choice may simply be the one that's most damaging to his ego.

He doesn't want Alana to have his classes. Doesn't want Hannibal to be driving him around.

And he doesn't want Jack to have won, tugging at the wishbone of his consciousness until he snapped off the bigger half for himself.

What Hannibal says Will said sounds unlike him, but also too much like his doubts and recent revelations. Hannibal has no reason to put words in his mouth. All he can gain is that Will plays some invading force in his life, taking up his time and a fair bit of free mental healthcare.

Will looks around at the subtle, dark opulence of the home around him. The steady snow that's begun to fall outside.

He got one of the other rescue volunteers to go feed the dogs for him today. He wonders about the message he must have left for Hannibal.

Really he thinks it just means he wants to go home to them.

He folds up his glasses and closes the cookbook.

"Could I trouble you for a ride back to my car?"

Hannibal looks doubtful. He looks like he wants to refuse, to sit there until Will is convinced of his limitations. But he sighs. Holds it back. And nods.

Will remembers Hannibal leaving the room again to retrieve his coat. Hears him come back again but doesn't acknowledge him--

And wakes up at 3:39 a.m., in his boxers, on the floor, holding and petting Winston.

That's all.

He's missing somewhere around 7 hours this time.

Winston doesn't mind when Will sobs, hot and agonized, into his soft fur. Only whines some and settles closer.

«»

He sleeps without setting an alarm. But the house is all locked up and the dogs start making a commotion when they need to go out.

Hannibal still has his phone so Will's not very surprised when the Bentley pulls up. He's bouncing the last tennis ball on the step between his feet and watching the dogs all nose around the yard, snuffle into the snow and bark around silly mouthfuls of it.

Jessie seems to be guarding him his morning, steady and breathing, pressed to his left thigh.

Hannibal marches up to the porch and stops when he makes it onto the steps. He looks back around at everything, squinting into the sun.

"Jack Crawford requests your presence at Quantico," Hannibal reports.

"My reality is disintegrating," Will reports. "I don't know how much of it Jack saw on the beach-"
"Apparently nothing," Hannibal looks down to him. Sympathy doesn't tighten the lines of his face and Will is grateful for that. "He didn't sound accepting of your sudden sabbatical. Or interested in my views as a physician. The world grinds on, I'm afraid."

"I don't remember driving home last night. I don't-" he shifts and pulls Jessie into his lap, warm and pliant. He has to pet her for a while before he can admit it. "I left my gun in the glove compartment. I guess I didn't even trust me last night. I um." He breathes deep, cold air in, breath visible coming out. "I can't be this anymore."

Hannibal gives that the depth of silence Will thinks it truly deserves. He moves to sit, after a while. He watches Will and the dog. "What do you need to survive right now? To survive your existence, settle in, and banish what is haunting you?"

Bare essentials. Hannibal is asking him to evaluate exactly what he needs to come back to life from this.

Will hugs Jessie close and when Winston trots up he grins and says, "Hey," and scratches at his ears before Winston turns to Hannibal.

Like he trusts him, too.

"Hello, Winston." He offers his hand and lets Winston nose at him before petting his head like he's not exactly sure how to properly do it.

Will laughs and it's a little watery but this might be the closest he's been to glimpsing 'happy' since he made soup with Hannibal.

This poor, poor, hoity-toity intellectual is gonna have to learn how to pet dogs.

As an example, Will pulls his hand, solid, down Winston's back a few times, cards into his fur, and pats him. Hannibal follows suit... kind of.

Hannibal is warm at Will's other side. He can be trusted. The dogs feel it, even if Will is too wary of the world to do so himself.

"Think I need help deciding that for a while."

Hannibal pets Winston too lightly but the dog endures it with a calm curiosity. "My help is on offer." He turns to Will. "Will you accept it?"

He nods. "I don't... think I can do my job and keep my head at the same time."

"That may be a fact. You may need to take a leave of absence."

Yeah. He was just going to quit. "If I put that paper on Jack's desk-"

"He will ignore it."

Will nods. "I'll, um. Maybe I need some sort of... medical record to present to my union rep or something?" He could cash out term leave and have something to live on. Or whatever. It's really not at the top of his list of concerns. "There's a facility in New York. I could check in."

Hannibal doesn't comment.

"I could use a ride."
"Will. Come with me somewhere today, first. I had intended to see Abigail. A few hours, a chat. Come with me," he repeats.

Will doesn't mull it over for very long. "I am increasingly considering me a danger to myself and others. I don't know if I should put myself in a room with her right now. There's her recovery to consider. And... I can't even imagine what I might tell her if I'm not in my own head."

Hannibal pats Winston some and rises. "I'd like you to try an exercise. Could we go inside a moment?"

Dr. Lecter has him draw a clock - a clock face, with the current time - and say the time out loud. He says, "My name is Will Graham. It's 1:07 p.m. We're in Wolf Trap, Virginia."

Hannibal accepts the notepad with a smile and pockets it so they can try it again later. It helps to know where and when he is, he supposes. And that one moment, Hannibal smiling and just a little bit hopeful, convinces Will to give him the afternoon, at least. So they go see Abigail.

Will knew she didn't have a high opinion of him.

It didn't crush him as much as he thought when he told her he was taking stock of things and Abigail said she was only important to him because he killed her dad.

He spends the drive back, with Hannibal, in tense silence. She wants to sell their story. Her disregard for Will is one thing - an understandable thing, if he's being completely realistic. He killed her father. He's responsible for not getting there in time to save her mother. Responsible for not stopping Garrett Jacob Hobbs before he sliced his own wife's neck.

All told, that much he understands.

But Hannibal has been so supportive of Abigail. Such a huge part of her recovery. The way Will sees it, Hannibal has been as good as family to her. That she would air his business and his role in the ordeal is more of a violation.

There has to be some way to convince her to leave Hannibal out of it.

"Will?" he calls low, over the violin on the radio.

"My name is Will Graham, it's nearly seven. I'm in your car, two miles from your house."

"Are you missing anything from today?"

"No. Just... ruminating."

"Abigail must gather what tools she believes she'll need to survive. The same as you. Though I do wish she would take advantage of us as a sounding board."

"Really just thrown herself in with that ginger vampire," Will curses under his breath. "Alana should probably hear about this. Maybe she'll be able to talk sense into Abigail."

Hannibal sighs. "I think it will take an effort on all our parts. Will. We should discuss."

"I can't- I kinda just. Can't," he rubs his eyes.

Hannibal takes the next turn towards his neighborhood. "Stay for dinner. Will, you aren't a
traumatized teen girl, I know you will hear me out. You may be desperate for a taste of normality but you are not desperate to lock yourself away, surely."

Will touches the window with three fingers. Feels the sharp cold of it.

He definitely owes Hannibal the ear that Abigail refused to give to him. He has to listen. Seems he can probably get dinner out of it at least.

Suddenly, the idea of being stationed in the kitchen and given something to do really does sound appealing.

To help Hannibal. To produce something nourishing.

He doesn't object when Hannibal parks the car. He turns and nods and Hannibal nods, too. Kills the engine.

They keep busy cooking. Will winds down, focusing on purées instead of the loom of the totem of bodies. They share a bottle of wine. They settle down to eat from highly stylized plates Will can hardly believe he had a hand in creating.

He finally smiles when Hannibal tips the bottle to him again and he hands his glass over for a refill before digging in.

"Weak as the ply may seem, it's a relief to see you feeling some ease," Hannibal comments. "Now I'm forced to come to the point, however. Will? If an inpatient facility suits your needs best," he sets the bottle aside after his own refill, "I will help you pack. Help you find a place for your dogs. It would leave me in a less-than-desirable spot, though. And I wish to present you with an alternative."

Will picks up his fork and hesitates but says. "Okay. I'm listening."

"Am I correct in assuming you have spent time in a similar facility, previously?"

Will's surprised; he's never mentioned it and he hardly thinks, whether Hannibal is calling himself Will's psychiatrist from day to day, or not, that he would really have dug into his medical records.

Hannibal waits, inhaling, then sipping from his glass.

"Yes," Will says before taking a bite.

It had helped for a time. It did. He spent a month at a place in Baton Rouge. But the month after, of readjustment and finding a new job, a new path after police work, that was hard.

The time after, seeing what you've missed, trying to catch up with the people you closed yourself off from. It's alienating in almost the same way he felt when he first decided to have himself committed.

"So you understand how much control you will hand over to the administration of this facility. You understand that Jack Crawford, champion of the sale and marketing of criminal psychology, may very well find a way to grant himself access to you, regardless of precautions."

Will laughs a little. Clears his throat. "Maybe a place in New Mexico, instead? California?"

Hannibal doesn't laugh. "How much are you still considering the latest case? The Ripper murders? Abel Gideon and the undue attention he's received?"

Near constantly.
Hannibal finally takes his own fork up. They eat in silence for a while.

"I guess I don't exactly get your point, here, Doctor. You're... opposed to my seeking treatment?"

"Not at all."

"I mean, I- you're the one who said-"

"I am not opposed to you seeking treatment. I may..." he pauses and takes a sip of wine. "I am almost certainly hesitant for more personal reasons."

Hannibal doesn't often inject himself into the everyday patterns of his friends' lives unless there's some reciprocity. It gives Will pause. He inhales over the wine, himself, still not as familiar with picking out the scents in it. And he thinks he knows where this is going all of a sudden.

Hannibal takes a few more bites before setting his fork aside again. "Tobias Budge died at my hands. It felt..." he closes his eyes briefly. "Awful. Will, Budge said to Franklin that he'd killed the officers who came to see him. I was chilled to my core at the thought that I had directed you to your death. When he... when I knew, for sure, that he was gone, I felt a hollowness that I did not ever expect would lift. Such tragedy and so much of it at my hands. You cannot imagine the sudden and breathtaking relief of seeing you alive so soon after." He gathers himself and it's... odd to see. To Will's knowledge, Hannibal is firm, even when unsure. And open, even when being ignored by the likes of Jack. But right now he is private and careful and unsteady in a way Will's never felt around him. One of the first unguarded waves of emotion Will's ever been impacted by in his presence.

He holds his glass by the stem and just stares at it.

Holy shit. Will really does know where this is going.

"I have, at hand, this second chance to keep you in my life," Hannibal continues. "I would... rather offer you more, offer you whatever you need to stay, than to meet you again after months - or more - whenever you're finally ready to rejoin the world."

He meets Will's eyes and, startlingly, is the first to look away. He licks his lips and if he were anyone else, Will would actually entertain the notion that Hannibal was in love with him, based on the simple, human tells alone.

"I know you don't find me interesting," he finally starts loosening up again. Smiles a bit. "But I don't-I would... like to keep my teammate. My friend, Will. We can have scans done. I have a network of colleagues who may take you on if you feel uncomfortable with my treatment. Or if, as I'm sure Alana will tell you, you should not be a friend to your psychiatrist."

Will doesn't know why anger flashes through him at the same time he knows the words are right.

He thinks about it later. It was the deference to Alana, still, in light of all Hannibal had just said about their friendship. Theirs. Without reference to Jack or Alana or even Abigail.

Will picked up his fork and ate. Cleared enough of his plate that Hannibal wouldn't be offended. And he asked to be taken home.

He couldn't deal with being presented something with so much potential, the same week as his mind has been splintering.

And after Alana's rejection.
And with his phone buzzing as Jack left yet another message.
The next morning he figured it would be Jack who showed up in Wolf Trap, instead.

He just didn't figure on why.

«»

Jack drove him to Quantico, but he didn't give a reason until they were shut in his office with Alana and Hannibal. For one hilarious moment, he almost imagined it was an intervention.

"Nicholas Boyle's body turned up. I hand it sent here and I want Abigail Hobbs to identify it."

Apparently Will was brought in just so Jack could rub his nose in exactly how much he wasn't welcome to accompany Abigail into the room. Jack said he couldn't trust him with respect to her. He wasn't even sure, after the past few days, if Will still qualified as a damn agent after his avoidant behavior.

(And that's awkward. He must not have heard from Human Resources yet.)

No one thinks it's a good idea to force Abigail into this except for Jack. Alana tails him out of the office hoping to protect her at least marginally.

And Will and Hannibal are left stewing.

Will crosses his arms. "He could do Abigail irreparable damage."

Hannibal is too-still. "Perhaps she is stronger than we know."

It's like he can't look at Will.

"Are you going back to the lab?" he asks to Jack's wall. All at once Hannibal loosens up and turns to him. "I am livid with Jack. To watch him do this to you, and now Abigail?" He paces some. "Will. I don't know how to prioritize your health and Abigail's safety when Jack Crawford-"

"I called my union rep last night. There's not much to clean out of my desk. And." He pulls his jacket off the back of the chair he laid it on.

In all honesty, he didn't plan to go through with it. Okay, he called yesterday. But he's here. Jack brought him in, he was going to tough it out and head down to the lab.

But this is unpardonable. And Hannibal is...

Hannibal is his friend.

They have a responsibility to Abigail. Hannibal has been attending to that responsibility and Will has been neglecting it.

She didn't kill Nicholas Boyle. She isn't her father.

She doesn't deserve what Jack's about to do to her.

And, if Will listens to his doctor, his friend, then he knows he doesn't deserve Jack's ire, either.

He removes his gun and badge and credentials from his coat. He places them on Jack's desk.

Jack won't win today. He won't collar Abigail as a killer and he won't keep Will on a leash any longer.
Will's hands rattle when he thinks about going to the lab.

He feels like he should, still. But a sea of nausea churns in his stomach at the thought, too.

Hannibal is at his side. A reminder that he can acknowledge his limits and someone won't think less of him. He doesn't believe his friendship with Hannibal has that limitation. In fact, in sticking it to Jack, Hannibal will only respect Will more. He asked for help and he's leaving behind the addiction that's killing him.

Will grips his coat too tight and has to pry his eyes away from his gun. Away from the door that would lead to the lab.

He doesn't belong to the world. He isn't everybody's hero.

He's got a light switch and he's alone up here. He can illuminate the way but he can't steer every boat away from calamity.

Will Graham is hardly gonna be the one-man show who saves the world.

It feels right, every ounce of reality, when Hannibal touches his elbow and offers a blank page of the notepad, his pen.

Will accepts them and draws a clock. "It's 10:40 a.m. My name is Will Graham. We're in Quantico, Virginia, and we're leaving as soon as Alana walks Abigail out of the building."

Hannibal accepts the notepad back and closes it. "Thank you for humoring me."

"Thank you for being here. For me and for Abigail."

"We will find a way to be what she needs. Both of us, Will," he assures him, with a hand to his shoulder. "We are her fathers, now," he whispers. "If you must go away for treatment - if you feel there is no other way? I will take you. I will work with an attorney to keep Jack away."

"It will be easier to be what Abigail needs if we stick together." He knows this, now, balls to bones. Hannibal is giving of himself - he is willing to rely on and support Will in whatever measures are necessary. Just like he'll have to do for Abigail, alone, if Will doesn't fucking step up.

If Will is mentally unstable, who better than Hannibal to help him?

He blinks up at Hannibal for a moment. "Heard back from Mr. Mesidor lately?"

Hannibal purses his lips and nods. "I didn't know when you would be up for hunting again. I was willing to..." he nearly shrugs.

He was willing to wait. Days, months. It didn't matter. He needs a teammate for this.

"Have to find you a new place soon," Will nods. "If I don't find another teaching gig I might end up crashing on your couch. Wouldn't want you to end up with a yard too small for my dogs," he shakes his head, like that would be a shame, a social faux pas.

Finally, Hannibal smiles.

«»

Abigail makes it out of Quantico without the shackles. Alana looks disturbed, but drives her back to the group home without bringing anything else up.
Unfortunately Abigail still has a desire to sell books. Hannibal has promised to make dinner for himself, Abigail, Will, and Ms. Lounds in a couple days. They have to make peace with the idea.

If they want to have Abigail's trust, they need to play nice with Freddie Lounds.

For his part, Will didn't make it out of the building without his badge and gun. Jack is forcing him to keep them until he puts all the paperwork through. All of it.

It's going to require more phone calls. He's already biting his nails about it.

Hannibal comes by the next day to pick Will up. He offers to keep his ID and firearm. Will doesn't want to draw down anymore of Jack's ire than he has already. He just keeps them in a high cupboard in his own, more frequently unused kitchen.

There are fish he caught, out on the river. Hannibal almost lovingly packs them in ice, delighted at the challenge to put them to use. So, in Baltimore, they make lunch before they meet Mesidor for more tours.

The selection of houses is lighter today. Just three. The first isn't even really a house - it's a condo in a high-rise full of millionaires.

Will sees something tick in Hannibal's jaw at the sight of it, but they both humor Mesidor's "alternative option," before they load back into his company SUV to head out in the opposite direction - to the outskirts of town.

Will... isn't doing so hot.

Time isn't skipping but he feels like that's because he's holding on to reality by a thread. Slightly sick and feeling an occasional lurch in his stomach.

He can't stop thinking about the totem pole. About the work he's left behind. The bodies packed into drawers in the lab.

Hannibal asks Mesidor to wait outside after they're done touring the second house, an unremarkable place, mainly serving as an example of what could be ordered from the builder to be made from the ground, up.

He directs Will back to the faceless kitchen and has him splash his face with water, take two aspirin for a low but persistent fever.

Will sees the totem pole jutting out of the snow in the back yard, climbing sky-high, topped with the scruffy ginger head of Nicholas Boyle with a knife hilt coming from the top of his skull.

He stares. He blinks.

It's not there.

He gulps another handful of water from the sink.

Hannibal's hand is warm and gentle, spread and centered on his back. "Will. You're shaking."

He nods, acknowledging this.

After a moment, Hannibal comes to stand next to him, close, hip-to-hip. His hand travels up to the back of Will's neck. His thumb digs in some and it feels good. Will's eyes flutter shut.

It's nice, the heat of Hannibal beside him, arm curving up his back.
He doesn't wanna wuss out on the damn house hunt.

"Will," Hannibal calls softly for his attention again and he shakes his head because he doesn't even want to hear the words - the offer to leave. Hannibal seems to read that on him. He pulls the notebook from his coat and opens it to a fresh page. Hands Will a pen.

He takes it, breathes for another long moment. Then begins drawing a clock face. "My name is Will Graham. It's 1:57 p.m. I'm just outside Baltimore, Maryland." He shuts the pen in the notebook and hands it over.

It's 1:57 p.m. in Baltimore and Will's still alive. He isn't stacked on a pole. He wasn't dug up from the icy earth. He is alive and Hannibal is beside him.

He decides confessing, speaking it all aloud is maybe the actual point of Hannibal's little clock routine.

So maybe he has to admit what just happened.

He tells Hannibal what he saw. His hand comes to the back of Will's neck again and they both breathe.

"I was going to offer to drive you home," Hannibal admits. "But now I rather think it's better to force you to focus on the next property. Let me know when you're ready to leave."

Yeah. He should focus on this. Stop thinking about the lab.

Decide to leave the FBI in the past.

It isn't healthy for him, bottom line. House hunting? Everybody does that. That's healthy. It's someplace to shift his focus.

Alright.

Hannibal kneads at his neck until he nods.

«»

Mesidor keeps his distance; Will must look like he has the flu. That's inconvenient considering he just decided to dedicate himself to the hunt.

This property is a lot nicer than the others today. The kitchen is just kind of adequate. It's a smidge bigger than Hannibal's current one but the lack of windows combined with the placement of the doors makes it feel somewhat claustrophobic.

The yard.
The yard is what does it for him.

No fences. And the southernmost property line is visible in the form of a small, rocky drop-off. A hiking trail curves nearby and that concerns Hannibal as a matter of privacy.

"Privacy." He can't help but scoff a bit, "Hannibal, the majority of other properties are packed so tight the dining rooms had more space than the backyards. Your neighbors would be practically on top of you-" he points, "uh, literally when it comes to the condo, by the way."

"People may feel they can hike directly onto the property, however."
"Fences. Signs. You can mark private property."

"Um," Mesidor jumps in. "No signs or fences above three feet," he shrugs. "HOA."

Will rolls his eyes. "Christ. And how much is the home owner's association with ridiculous regulations like that?"

"A...bout $720." He hesitates. "Per month."

Hannibal quietly exits the kitchen for the front office.

That would be a 'no.'

Will pushes his hair behind his ears. "Alright. Mr. Mesidor, that's not gonna work here, but, this? This is on the right track."

"Yeah? I mean." His eyes skitter in the direction Hannibal left. "Are you sure?" he asks with his voice dropped low.

Will can easily imagine feedback could be a little slim from Doctor Lecter. He's more critical after the fact than constructive when it comes to people he assumes should be good at their jobs already. But Mesidor isn't a mind reader.

Will..... kind of... is.

In a way.

Alright. If this is his new focus for the moment, he's gonna elbow in. "Look, if I can find some places to look at online, would you be able to set up viewings?"

"O-of course," he digs in his pockets for a business card. "Call. Or send me the links. We're not limited in selection by any means, but... being more familiar with your partner's tastes, I'd really appreciate if you had the time to spare. I also didn't know what I should be including in my search for yourself, Mr. Graham. We hadn't discussed-

Will waves him off and flicks the card against his fingers. "You're not slacking, I know this is supposed to be a long process, but." Will shrugs and laughs, deciding to roll with his own inside joke, "I'm not exactly the breadwinner in this arrangement, so I've got the time to give it a shot."

«»

Will (mostly) controls himself at dinner with Hannibal, Abigail, and Freddie.

The book idea still bothers him.

He really doesn't think Abigail understands exactly what she's doing to her future (or her past, including the memory of her own mother). The bigger problem is that she doesn't seem to care what, exactly, it does to Will and Hannibal whom Lounds will hardly agree to paint as benevolent characters.

It keeps him on edge. Which doesn't really help with the flashes of corpses and crime scenes he keeps hallucinating.

There's a reason to claw for his calm, though: Abigail.

Hannibal's gonna be driving him home and, if Freddie leaves soon, Will can at least talk to Abigail some. And it doesn't have to be about the book deal, it can be about the role he wants to start playing
in her life. If she'll allow it. Or it could be about... shit... books, the news, movies. Anything. He
doesn't care. He'd settle for talking about the weather if it didn't get awkward after three minutes.

Abigail starts clean-up with Hannibal, ferrying things to the kitchen as Will still tries not to leap over
the table at every inanity that comes out of Freddie's mouth. Taking one for the team lets Hannibal
escape back to the sanctuary of his kitchen, which he probably needs after so long in Freddie's
company.

Will needs a breather, too, but Will didn't do the majority of the cooking.

He finally shows Freddie out a damn hour later when they've finished the wine.
(When Will has finished the wine.)

He locks the door and shucks his jacket so he can help if there are any dishes left. He snags their
glasses and the empty bottle and heads to the kitchen.

The sound of a quiet, distressed voice.

Of Abigail crying.

He's as silent as he can be. He rounds the corner.

Abigail's back is to him.

Hannibal holds her tight.

Will had assumed that her look at the table - that startled look - was at least the beginnings of the
realization that, if Freddie Lounds assumed everyone had something to hide, no matter what they
said, they would always think the same of her, book or no book.

He doesn't know why, but he sees his friend holding Abigail close, comforting her, and he knows
he's wrong.

He knows that she does have something to hide. And.

And he's almost sure what it is. Which is.

Well. Pretty gut-wrenching.

Something always nagged at him. Somehow, he always knew it. He just didn't know why--

Or maybe didn't want to know why.

Hannibal hugs her tight when she whimpers something.

"You're not a monster. I have seen monsters. You are a victim," Hannibal corrects her. "And Will
and I? We're going to protect you," he promises.

He holds her closer and his eyes flash up to Will, across the kitchen.

There's no question.

Whatever it is? Yes. They will protect her.

Will nods. He knows Hannibal sees him.
It makes his heart clench to think she didn't know that before. That she imagined they could think of her as anything but a victim. She's barely college-aged. No matter what happened, it was her father forcing this massive, grim, ugly thing on her. It was never Abigail's fault. Never.

He wants to go to them. Wants to touch her back and pull her into his own arms. Kiss her head, like she was his own and in distress and she need not be.

But, for now, all he can do is nod again, firm and silent, and watch as Hannibal closes his eyes, comforting her. Then Will backs away and into the stillness of the rest of the house.

Whatever it is, she could tell Hannibal, but not Will Graham of the FBI.

He decides to retreat back to the dining room and sets the glasses back down. He sits. Pulls out his phone.

You know. He doesn't know exactly how many bedrooms Hannibal was aiming to get in his new home. But it better have enough guest room for two.

He starts scrolling listings.

«»

Alana arrives, fresh from her late class, to take Abigail back to the group home.

Will doesn't see her. He only hears her at the door. Abigail sounds cheered again. Or at least close to it, if a little strained.

Whatever it is, she's not sharing it with Alana, either.

But Hannibal? Hannibal saw Will there and included him. He made sure Abigail knew he would be protecting her, too.

It's just them. And that gives Will a deep satisfaction. Not the proudest kind - the kind with teeth and scales that exhales fire on anyone who tries to take his shit.

Hannibal is on his side. He thinks Will's good enough for Abigail even when Alana doesn't think he's good for anyone right now.

Okay - he understands where Alana's coming from. She's not wrong.

But some jagged, jilted part of himself needs to revel in this. The certainly that his friend still gets him. Still trusts him. And Abigail will grow to trust Will because Doctor Lecter does.

Hannibal wanders back to the dining room.

He sits beside Will this time. Not at the head of the table.

They're quiet for a while. No more wine and nothing else to focus on. Turned slightly towards each other. Will feels steadied, ready to accept whatever he's about to learn. Hannibal looks open to sharing that.

"You heard," he states it, it isn't a question.

Will nods. "She can't think--" he doesn't know exactly what it was. He has an idea of it. But no matter what it is, he needs to face it with this spoken aloud. He can't make what Hannibal said false.
"She can't think that I would treat her like a monster. Not ever."

Hannibal nods. "She may need time to believe that. Nicholas Boyle's body still sits in the lab right now."

Will's guts twist.
It was her. She killed him.

It was her.

"The attack?" he prompts, his voice pointed but the lead intentionally vague.

"All of it true except the end."

"How's that, Doctor?" he can't help the edge of skepticism in his voice.

"Alana and I were attacked by Nicholas Boyle. Abigail defended herself."

Defended herself. She was raised a hunter.

He clears his throat. "Evidence?"

Hannibal nods, which is curious. "One of the knives logged from the den."

That's not what Will meant but it tells him more than he expected. Hannibal would only know how she did it if he saw the weapon.

If he helped ditch the weapon.

And the body.

"Didn't hide it very well," he tries not to snarl, panic and fight climbing his throat at the same time.

"We aren't exactly seasoned professionals when it comes to concealing bodies."

"If that's true, Jack will find out."

"Jack has already tested Abigail. And when she leaves the facility, it's me she visits. If pressed, I'll admit to it. Though what we say should be private, in my opinion. Her experiences with her father make her a victim. She is under no illusions about the reality of what she's done. From the girls to the boy, it was them or her."

*Them or her.*
All of them. Or her.

She did help her father.

Will leans into his hand, on the table. Covers his mouth and takes a deep, steadying breath through his nose. "Why didn't you-- why--"

"You know why," he says, quiet and tired for the first time Will has witnessed.

It makes him back off immediately.

Of course he knows why. Defending herself from Nicholas Boyle would have been circumstantial enough for Jack to pin her as her father's assistant. And she was. And she only ever was because she
knew it was her life, or their lives.

Facing Boyle, she knew it was her life, or his life.

She just practiced what she always had - she saved her own life. Her father had failed her in that; the police failed her back on her property.

Hannibal? He helped her. Hannibal didn't fail her.

Enough men have failed Abigail Hobbs in her life. Will can't add to that mess.

If she were a monster, they would know. What Hannibal said is true - they know exactly who the bad guys are; she's not one of them. Abigail is a victim.

Hannibal's hand comes to his shoulder.

Will would be locking her up if he said anything. Locking her up for what her father did to her. What the world has done to her.

His training tells him that it isn't his decision to make.

His training tells him she's a probable accomplice, if not an actual murderer in the Minnesota Shrike case. She committed at least a misdemeanor in self-defense. And she lied. Hid evidence.

Hannibal is a criminal, too.

"Will," Hannibal calls to him, squeezing his shoulder. "Garret Jacob Hobbs was her only understanding of a father. We must change that."

He takes a deep breath. Scrubs a hand over his face.

They were... kind of figuring things out.

Will was gonna get some distance. He was following Hannibal's advice and prioritizing himself because... he has people to answer to, now. Hannibal and Abigail.

And his whole view of them has been turned on its head.

Or.

God. Maybe it hasn't, really. He can see through what's happened -- see to the light at the end of the tunnel. He sees Hannibal, slowly becoming someone he might consider - maybe - his best friend. Or something like it.

He sees Abigail.

Sees her in a way Garret Jacob Hobbs could not.

See. See.

Yes. He sees.

Abigail thinks she's a monster.

A monster wouldn't let this eat away at them.

A monster wouldn't have expressed such horror when they went upstairs at the cabin and found a
girl mounted there.

If Abigail were such a monster, Alana wouldn't be so scared for her, so righteously angry at Jack.

Even with his own crumbling faculties, between Alana and Hannibal, Will can't believe that they'd miss psychopathy in Abigail. Alana and Hannibal are seasoned professionals and he's already trusted them with his heart and his life.

They'd notice.

Alana knew Abigail was hiding something.
This was it.

She is desperate not to be seen as her father. That's all she's really hiding, when it comes down to it. She doesn't want to go to prison for the way he damaged her life.

Will swallows audibly.

"We are her fathers now," Hannibal repeats quietly, like it's a hard, unshakable truth that he already knows.

A truth that Will simply must accept.

So he does. He nods.

Hannibal squeezes his shoulder again and his hand soothes up to his neck.

"Maybe it would... be easier to protect her from-- maybe I h-have to go back to Jack," he trips over the words. Maybe he can protect Abigail and Hannibal better from within the FBI.

Hannibal's look of sympathy is slight and hard to read. His hand moves to cradle Will's head. "Your fever persists," he seems to measure. "If you returned, you would continue an assault on your own consciousness. I fear for Abigail, some," he allows, "but the danger Jack poses to you is already well-established. We could hide Abigail, if absolutely necessary. It would be harder to hide you," he finally smiles, just a shade. "And I must admit to some bias," he nearly whispers. "For as Abigail may grow older, move on to university, and no longer need our protection, some day in the future, I think it will be you and I all the days after. I have to think about what would be best for us long-term. And I freely admit that the only sure way I have of protecting you is to say." He stops. Breathes.

"No. End your time with the FBI. For your sake and ours. Please."

So that's it. That's his case laid out. Will is burning up. By the end of every damn day it's more unbearable.

He wants to pass out. Wants to follow the wine into a dreamless sleep, if at all possible.

He remembers the cookbook with a grin. And one of his college roommates from when he was crammed into a cheap apartment with four guys.

"Can't be testing positive for THC in the Bureau. And marijuana mutes your dreams. Maybe, um. Maybe I have to make a contact and we can make some weed butter and... I can learn to bake and chill out." He says it like a foreigner. Like a damn old guy.

Hannibal smiles back at him and thumbs at his neck before letting go. "Acetaminophen first. For the fever. Will, it's quite late and I confess I'm more tired than I had planned. Can I convince you to use the guest room for the night?"
Shit. Sure. It's not like he has anyplace better to be. His own tiny home, his job putting his brain through the wringer.

Even after a night like this, those other earthly demands all steadily fade into Hannibal's and Abigail's shadows.

«»

It's never exactly been a convenience that Will lives so far from Hannibal, but it's becoming a real pain in the ass, lately.

He missed his dogs. Getting back into the field put a strain on him because of how often he had to ask colleagues and neighbors to check in and feed them.

And, god, he just. Just missed them. He just loves them.

He's laying on his floor, laughing and letting them tromp all over him and talk to him in funny noises and slobber him and Eliot is cuddling his head when bad news arrives.

Will expected his final paperwork. He doesn't get it.

He gets Jack Crawford, angry, his cases piling up, and his bloodlust for the Chesapeake Ripper growing.

He doesn't say a word when Will opens the door to him. He barges in and starts thumbtacking photos of a new crime scene to Will's damn walls.

So he walks to the kitchen.

His heart hammers and he wants to either turn around and figure the damn case out or scramble for his phone and call Hannibal for rescue.

It's well into the workday. Will wasn't doing much but compulsively emailing home listings to Mesidor.

He has a boat motor to tinker with. And something like 240 hours of accrued, unused paid leave coming to him if Jack ever allows the paperwork to go through.

He's holding his head, leaning over the counter, willing to wander off outside and walk in the snow for hours rather than face whatever horrors Jack tacked up in his front room.

Those first few days, back in the field, when they were searching for the missing Shrike victims, Will lost control rapidly. Just two nights of dwelling on the case had him on edge, shaking, unsteady, headachy and anxious. He was seeing antlers everywhere. The Shrike was inside his ears but nowhere to be seen. He saw that twisted love, first hand, had it mowing over his own thoughts and feelings every minute of the day.

And he learned to control that dramatic reaction. But he never stopped feeling it.

Knowing what he did - that he could hear and see the actions of these people simply by meeting the dead eyes of their victims - he scared himself tenfold after Hobbs.

He knew the taste of the desire to snuff out beautiful things, human lives, things he wanted to
decimate and consume. And he knew the feeling first-hand. The secret satisfaction of filling Garret Jacob Hobbs with bullets.

The contradiction of wanting to expel something that good from your system is hard to deal with. It's like eating a piece of chocolate cake and hoping it will turn to fire ants inside your stomach and teach you never to eat cake again.

He could so easily become Jack if he had Jack's power. He could more easily become the Ripper if he had the Ripper's power.

And that feels like rot in his veins.

He can tell when Jack has followed him into the kitchen. He doesn't know that, when he opens his eyes, a photo will sit below him on the counter.

A blood-soaked bedroom. Broken open and run from.

A nightmare in a photograph.

Someone else's nightmare of their own death.

He's too still. So Jack drops another photo in front of him.

A face, opened like a maniacal smile gone horribly wrong, jaw pried up, eyes wide open and fearful.

He feels himself lose it, this time.

«»

Will wakes up with the photos ripped off the wall and crumpled in his hands, breathing hard.

He tosses the handfuls of thick photo paper aside. Scrambles outside to see.

No blood. No harm done. Tire tracks from when Jack arrived and when he left.

He runs, anyway, to check the rest of the house, the shed, the nearby wooded area.

A couple of the dogs follow him, leaping after him and trotting, excited, around his ankles.

No blood. Not in the snow, the shower, the kitchen, under his bed, matted in the dogs' fur.

He stumbles back into his house and collapses to his knees in the doorway. Winston bumps his head into him and whines.

For some reason, Winston's sympathy ratchets up the panic in Will's belly. His breathing won't slow down and he can't stop feeling a... a throat under his hands. Blood under his nails and thick, splashed against his neck.

He can't calm down.

He knows he's burning up again. Has been for a while. If he's not going cr--

If it's not a tumor or something, his brain is at least thoroughly fried.

That clench in his chest is also either a developing heart problem or a full-blown panic attack. The idea of either of those makes him want to call Hannibal again. Some stray thought plants the idea I
wanna go home which, if he were feeling more objective, he could connect to his developing friendship and the decay of the established relationships he was hoping to count on between his coworkers and fellow teachers.

The lab team always looked at him like a bomb about to go off. Jack stops by to assault him with photos he didn't want to see. Alana can hardly be alone in a room with him. Even Abigail assumed he would call her a monster. She thinks of him, at any given point, as something between her father's killer and a threat to her freedom.

It grips him at his center - wanting to go home.

He climbs up. Gets his phone.

Calls.

He can't bring his voice together by the time Hannibal answers, "Good afternoon, Will."

Afternoon. Perfect. How much fucking time did he lose? He didn't even check.

"Will?"

"I need help," he says, his voice unstable and wet.

"Where are you?" Hannibal demands.

He sniffles, wasn't even aware hysterical tears had come. "My house." He walks backwards and falls to the bed when his legs hit it. "Please can you-- can you call Jack first. Make sure I didn't- make sure he's-"

"Jack Crawford was there?"

"I don't know what I did. I don't know how late it is. I- I-" he stutters, running out of anything to verbalize. I wanna go home, he curls over his knees.

"I will be there as soon as I can. I was heading to the market. It will still be some time. Will, do you want to stay on the line with me?"

He breathes deep, or tries to. Looks over at his alarm clock. "It's 4:32 p.m." He clamps his eyes shut at the amount of time he lost. "My name is Will Graham. I'm in Wolf Trap. I'm... here. On the bed. At my house."

"Will," Hannibal calls to him softly. "Sit with your dogs. Feel them alive and breathing."

"Okay," he sniffs. He moves, sits down on the floor and pulls Chester over to his lap. He is fidgety and pleased about it. He huddles close to Will and it feels good. Winston stops his anxious wandering and sits close to Will's side. Sarah comes to sit at his knee. He breathes some small relief.

"I lost time," he admits.

"I'm sorry for it," Hannibal says. "Do you want me to call Jack? To check?"

"Yeah. Yes, please."

"I'll call back as soon as I've spoken with him."
"And you're coming here?"

"Yes. I made an appointment for you to speak with a neurologist, a former colleague."

Relief floods him. "Thank you," he nearly sobs. "Thank you."

"I'll call right back, Will. Keep your phone close."

«»

It's twenty minutes later, but that's also twenty minutes that bring Hannibal closer to Wolf Trap.

"Jack is in ill spirits but quite alive," he says when Will picks up.

Will wonders why it feels so good to him that Hannibal sounds pissed. "He came here with- there was a case," he looks at the scattered, torn and crunched photos around him.

"I heard. He said you were of tremendous help. Do you remember what it was about?"

"Flashes. Parts," he shrugs. His feet are falling asleep where he sits. He buries his nose in Chester's fur, hugging him.

"Will. Just ten minutes, now."

"I can hang up. You can drive," Will offers.

"Tell me about the emails you've been sending Mr. Mesidor. He mentioned you've been of significant assistance."

Will gives a thin laugh and tries to explain some of the properties he's found. Thankfully it's not long before Hannibal arrives. He doesn't stop listening, just comes through the front door on his own and hangs up as Will does.

He comes and crouches nearby. He runs the backs of two fingers over Winston's head. The dog allows it with a pant and a pleased wave of his tail. He's learned how to be 'nice' around Hannibal where the others have had to be clicked and whistled at a lot more often.

"Hello," Hannibal says to him, then looks up. "Hello, Will."

"Wanna go home," he breathes, suddenly feeling on edge again. He ripped Hannibal from his life. He eats up his time. Makes him haul all the way down here-

"Will," Hannibal reaches to touch his cheek. "Warm again."

Will nods and frumps like a child letting the misery have him.

"Tomorrow," Hannibal promises. "Tomorrow after my regular appointments we set up a meeting. I can drive you there or come in with you."

Will reaches up to press Hannibal's hand down on his face firmly. "I know it's not a fair exchange. But I go on the house tours with you."

Hannibal nods. "I'll come with you, then. Will? We will pursue all possible avenues. I promise you."

His eyes fall shut. God. He needed this.
Help. Someone to watch his back and brainstorm with him.

He had thought everything was so much easier on his own. Not being seen. Keeping himself together and falling apart in private.

This is... this is so simple. He had no idea.

Will can trust Hannibal. Hannibal held a secret to protect Abigail. That's the only obfuscation he can see. That was trust he was sworn to keep and he did.

Now he trusts Will just as much. Will can let himself trust back.

"I confess to being quite livid with Special Agent Crawford," he says, more formal where he wishes he could inflict the most damage. "He seems to have no intention of ceasing his pursuits through you. Using you when you've expressed in no uncertain terms you're no longer in his employ. We may have to take steps."

"Get your neuro guy to fill out a doctor's note, maybe? 'Please excuse Will Graham from work. His brain is thinking about murder without his permission'," Will jokes.

When he opens his eyes, it's to Hannibal's wry look. He withdraws his hand to help Will stand and keeps an arm around him walking across the house and into the kitchen.

He's a good mother hen. He puts Will in a chair and heads to his fridge only to find it predictably spare. "I should have freaked out after you picked up groceries."

"That would have been helpful," Hannibal smiles, then sighs at the state of the pantry, too. "I feel awful, Will. I thought I was educating you to know better than this."

Will smiles and props his head on his hand watching Hannibal attempt to pull something together, close-slicing a brick of cheese and pulling acceptable components from a bag of trail mix. He arranges crackers and brings over... a beautifully-composed cheese plate with dried and sliced fruit.

"You amaze me."

Hannibal finds napkins and sits with him. "Please eat. I'm distressed about the state of your... well."

"Everything," Will fills in, nodding.

Hannibal sighs.

It's nice not to be alone for a while.

«»

The appointment with the neurologist doesn't go well.

Hannibal helps Will explain the situation first, and then he leaves Will alone with the nurses to get his stupid brain scan.

What Dr. Sutcliffe comes up with is basically. Well.

You can't see mental illness in a fucking MRI.

Yes. Of course.
Sutcliffe phrases it as carefully as he can. Carefully, but not gently. The same way Hannibal did.

Will feels like a jackass.

"Look, we'll run some more tests," Sutcliffe rattles off options and Will is just. Yeah.

So. He wants to sit for more tests. He knows Hannibal will take him. But the entire time he'll be talking to him. Easing him into the truth of the matter.

The truth Will already knows.

There are people out there who need a good neurologist and who deserve to be taking up this doctor's time.

Will doesn't feel like one of them.

Hannibal greets him, after. Doesn't prompt him to say anything.

They get into the Bentley and they don't speak. They head through the city until they get to the figurative fork in the road. One direction is Hannibal's place, the other takes Will back home. But the dogs are walked and fed and it's late enough for dinner. And as much as he feels like it would be ugly to be stared at, awful to sit across from Hannibal and wait for the truth to spill out -- as much as Will should maybe be alone right now?

He's thinking of yesterday. And how much he wanted the safety and surety of Hannibal's company when he was scrambling for clarity.

This companionship is the closest thing he feels to home right now. His house, that spot of light in the vast horizon of Wolf Trap, is starting to feel like the lighthouse he abandoned, too far out to sea for a rescue when smoke starts pouring out of the engine room.

In the massive nothingness of the ocean or space, far from the twinkling lights that could mean safety, fire equals death. And Will knows his head is on fire. Known it since Elliot Budish. Since before.

At the last stoplight before Hannibal asks, Will breaks the almost sacred silence of the car, with Hannibal letting him think and demanding nothing - he asks for dinner.

"Of course," Hannibal agrees softly.

Will turns away and watches Baltimore pass out the window. In the wrong light he can see his streaked reflection and he's sure Hannibal knows he's breaking down over here, but kindly says nothing, even when Will can't control his breathing.

Hannibal says it would be a great help if Will could set the table, open the wine, hand him dishes. He takes on the cooking duties himself. Neither of them press for more. Will is occupied and that's enough. Helpful but not in the way.

A set of light dishes, thin broth, aroma, greens, spice. It makes Will feel vaguely healthier and he smiles to Hannibal and nods and thanks him. And they are quiet for a long time after.

Hannibal doesn't move to take up the dishes and Will isn't ready to talk until he is suddenly-

Open.

Because he's acknowledged that he needs help. He's used those dreaded, heavy words, I need help.
Hannibal has offered all kinds of help. Will has watched Abigail ask Hannibal for help. Everyone, from Alana to fucking Freddie has as good as told Will he needs goddamn help.

But he has never explicitly asked this of Hannibal. Hannibal asked it of him for something mundane and... human. Like house hunting.

And it opened up their experiences together. They've poked around town, started cooking together, and simply spent time with one another. Hannibal is offering to take him to every specialist under the sun until Will gets the answers he wants.

He already gave him the answer he actually needs. So maybe he can answer this. The four, exact words that will separate his timeline into *His Life With the FBI* and *Life After the FBI*.

Those heavy words now specifically aimed at Hannibal.

It feels like Hannibal might have been waiting a long time to hear them.

"Can you help me?" Will asks.

Hannibal gives the question due consideration. He hears the weight of it. Hears what Will is asking. And he takes everything seriously. If he weren't the one, he would say so. Will can trust that.

Will needs to know if he can have Hannibal's help, specifically, and not just as a fucking chauffer, not just for free meals, not just as a place to crash when he's too feverish to drive back to Virginia.

He needs Hannibal to tell him if they can share this partnership, this team, for good and for certain. If they can tell one another hard truths and if they can find the courage to listen without fear and without anger.

"Yes," Hannibal says.

Will lifts his eyes so he doesn't ask this of his fucking wine glass. "Will you help me? With my. Instability. Please?"

"As much as I possibly can. Yes."

"Sutcliffe knows it's not physical. He knows but. Well, he tried not to say it outright. And I think I know that's the truth."

Hannibal nods. "Alright. Is that a conclusion you're satisfied with?"

Will grins. "I don't know how anyone could be satisfied with that kind of diagnosis, but it's not the first time I've heard it, Doctor. So," He sighs. "The majority opinion is that it's the right conclusion. And that's the place where I start treatment."

Hannibal nods again. "And you have. Will, I think you believe you've been too stubborn about this. But it's a hard diagnosis. And you were right to seek other opinions. My offer remains open, should you request more tests. Doctor Sutcliffe already told me he would see you any upcoming Tuesday or Thursday evening, should you request further scans and referrals. That being said? I will help you from here if this is square one. And, again, you haven't been so inflexible. In fact, I think the first step was separating yourself from an abusive environment. You agreed. I understand your continued reluctance, but you would not have been as useful to the FBI for years to come if you used yourself up within the next few months. There would be nothing left of you. That future matters to me more than to you, I suspect. Will," he touches two fingers on the back of his hand so he'll stop staring at his fingers twisting the glass stem.
Will meets his eyes. He was listening. But all this is very hard. Hard enough without eyes.

And it's starting to get to the point where Will doesn't always feel he can pull himself away from Hannibal's eyes. He worries what that could mean for him if he lost time again. Emotions have always loomed so large for Will, his whole life. A connection too great to someone he's coming to need and appreciate and... want close? It feels dangerous in this condition.

"I matter to me," Will objects weakly. "Kinda need there to keep being a me. Someone's gotta feed the dogs."

"Will." Short and sharp. Near enough to angry. "You only reinforce my point. It matters to me that something be left of you. It drives me to distraction that it means nothing to Will Graham, himself. The dogs? They may be adopted and fed and cared for if you were gone. I am the one who feeds me, Will. And I would still need more of you than whatever scrap Jack Crawford saw fit to leave me."

Now he really can't look Hannibal in the eyes.

He.... really fucking means it, holy shit.

So. Well. Maybe that just means Will leaves the other avenues open. You know, in case Alana is a little bit right. Like maybe it's not completely okay for a doctor to treat their friend.

Or. Their family.

Someone who finds a home in them.

Maybe it would be the healthy, Hannibal-approved option to see other doctors about this, not just Hannibal.

"I should see Sutcliffe again. Thursday, I guess. Like you said. Just in case."

Hannibal eases back in his chair again. Nods again. Licks his lip and looks elsewhere.

Geeze.

Hard to give this space. Hard to play neutral, like he doesn't see what's happening here.

But he's a professional, too. And sometimes he has to step back and watch emotions happen to other people before calling them out for what they are.

So he doesn't tell Hannibal he's got a bad poker face and he recognizes, now, what's going on.

He can test a hypothesis, at least. "You, um. Still have that guest room free?"

"Of course," Hannibal lifts and breathes over his glass, takes one last sip before rising. Then he pauses. "Mr. Mesidor called earlier. I have three hours before appointments tomorrow. Can I keep you until then?"


"I think we should meet in the study, before you retire for the night. To discuss anything you wish. To possibly... set goals. Explore therapies."

Will nods. "Let's start by the sink. I'll, um. Fill the dishwasher with you."
Hannibal smiles. It's tense. And Will knows the many reasons why.

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There are snowballs and cannonballs.

The situation cannonballs soon thereafter.

Will wakes up during his second MRI. Or after. Or something. At least he thinks he does.

He came to Sutcliffe's office alone this time and there had only been Will, the doctor, and a tech.

No one is around.

Confused, he gathers his stuff and dresses. Walks outside and finds Sutcliffe on the pavement. He's broken open, his insides spread out on the walkway, but enough is still intact. He's still warm on the frozen pavement. Will calls 9-1-1. And, like an idiot, he calls Jack before he calls Hannibal. Because he lost time. Just over thirty minutes, but still. He could be responsible and Jack would be all over that, anyway.

The doctor hit the pavement so hard he burst some things entirely. Some organs simply liquefied and unaccounted for according to the team on scene. How is that even possible?

Beverly assures Will this was a suicide, but agrees to take samples from under every single one of Will's fingernails.

When Hannibal collects Will, later, he's a fucking wreck.

The next few days don't get any better.

He feels like he's the one who soaked up all the blood Sutcliffe dumped on the ground. He had no idea what was happening as he lost time. This man just walked away and ended himself after exposure to Will.

He winces because, what does that say about him?

Through fevered dreams to fevered days, Jack arrives in Wolf Trap to deliver all Will's cancelled paperwork and his ID and his firearm and explains how the sign-up for the FBI requires certain terms of public service and, with all his hours calculated, Will simply falls short and severance would require at least another eight months, thank you very much Human Resources Department.

Whatever he throws Will into, he hardly understands. The side he swims to is deep and red and full of sharks and viscera.

Garret Jacob Hobbs taunts Will at every turn. He shows up, in the flesh. Rotten flesh, but still.

Will wakes up.

He wakes up standing in Hannibal's dining room. Heated and freezing and sweating and gripped by the cold that comes before death.

"Will, can you hear me?" it sounds like he's under gallons and gallons of water, but yes. Will hears Hannibal. "Repeat after me: My name is Will Graham."

So. He does.
Hannibal tests him. A short, quick check to see if he's had a stroke, apparently.

He hasn't. Might have been a seizure.

Garret Jacob Hobbs is nowhere to be seen when Hannibal helps him to sit, asks him what's happened.

He puts a hand to Will's head and Will sinks into the touch.

"You have a fever," Hannibal explains. "You were hallucinating. You thought he was alive, here, in the room with you."

No, no. "I saw him."

"He's a delusion disguising reality. Don't let that let you slip away. You killed Garret Jacob Hobbs once, you can find a way to kill him again." He starts to rise and Will can't-

He doesn't have a grip on what's going on here. Hannibal is here and Will's gun is here and-

Jesus. Did he wave his fucking gun at Hannibal?!

"Wait. Where are you going?"

"Up, with you," he reaches around Will and helps him stand again.

"Did I- the gun, did I-"

"I had no fear for myself, Will. But I have no idea how long you've been at this temperature. I would estimate it to be at least over 102. We're going to the hospital." He stops, touches the side of Will's face this time. "Not for good. Not to an institution. Will, I think something may have been missing. Perhaps the tests didn't show it. Something not easily apparent. I'm not locking you up and throwing away the key. Can you hear me?"

He can, yes. Over his own panting breaths, his panic and confusion. Will concentrates on understanding this.

"Jack-"

"Is hunting Abel Gideon. And he knows, now, with the state of you -- I think he's seen exactly what he's been doing to you. You walked from his custody to my house."

"Walked?!" His unsteadiness. Exhaustion. Now he knows what to attribute it to.

"The situation is under control. Now this will be, as well. But I want you to understand, Will. In fact, I want your consent: Let me take you to the hospital."

His hand hasn't left Will's face. He removes it and looks away and if Will weren't so unsteady he might recognize-

He nods. Forces himself to say it - to ask again. "Can you help me?"

Hannibal, head bowed towards him, smiles like... like he did before Will stayed over that last night. Before Jack showed back up on his doorstep. After they talked it through and made plans. After they talked about head scans. And homes.

Pleased to be asked.
"Come now, dear Will." He gets his coat, helps Will out the back door and shields him from the screaming, icy wind, helps him into the Bentley.

They pass a strange old car. Like... he thinks it must be the same model as the Hobbs family owned or something. It seems somewhat familiar.

He remembers Hannibal reciting his vitals to the ER staff. Remembers one final squeeze of his hand.

And Will Graham wakes up.

A long time later.

Alone.
It's the third day of consciousness before he gets a visitor who isn't hospital staff. That, in itself, portents what he knows is going to be a truly rough explanation of events.

Beverly isn't blurry when she materializes before Will's eyes. She isn't underwater or on fire or wearing the pale white skin of the dead.

She smiles like it's her birthday all the time. It's seriously too bad she's too smart for him; she's gorgeous. "Hey, handsome." Her voice is a little worn. Her eyes a little red.

"Still hallucinating I guess. Divine figures by the hospital bed. Sign me up for an exorcism." His throat hurts and he croaks but she still grins and helps him sit, get some water.

She's quiet for too long. Beverly is never fucking quiet. That says a whole lot, too.

"Do I want to know?"

"Well. Your resignation paperwork says you actually can't know?"

"Can't. Shit. Did they change their minds?"

She blinks, frowns. "Change their minds?"

Wow. Okay.

He maybe shouldn't be surprised that Jack managed to lie about that for... jesus. Was it two weeks? More?

"And how is good ole Agent Crawford?" he snarks.

And Beverly immediately shuts down. The lights just go out from behind her eyes.

"Shit."

"Yeah." She sits down on the edge of his hospital bed. Flattens her hands over her knees, stares at the denim. Steels herself. "I hate this," she says under her breath. "Maybe I... I almost think Hannibal should be the one to tell you." She tries looking off. The windows, the sheets, his vitals ticking away on the monitors.

She looks up and he knows.

He knows. "Who was-"

"Gideon got... Chilton. Then Alana. God, I'm sorry," she looks to the ceiling and breathes. "And Jack sent away too much of his back-up. And the-"

She has to shut her mouth tight for a moment and her eyes are teary but she's not one to draw pain out. She has to let him know.

"The Ripper got Jack. He used Gideon as a distraction and. And the Ripper got Jack," she takes a great, deep breath. "Doctor Bloom. Crawford," she seems to recite. "Doctor Bloom," she says again. "Crawford." A finality to it, almost like she didn't have that until now.

"Ch-chilton?" he manages to stammer.
"Will live. Worse for wear but. He will. Hey," she takes his hand over the sheets. "I know you and Alana Bloom were close. And. Crawford," they both impulsively smile. "He could be a bastard but." she has to look away again and their smiles are gone.

She squeezes his hand and lets go. Straightens up to face him again. "Listen. We found something odd in Sutcliffe's paperwork. That's why I came here again. Didn't expect to get your wit and charm this time, but I'm glad I did," she smiles. "I handed over the documents - well. *Copies of the evidence* to the hospital staff. HIPAA aside, I hope you forgive me. Not like I meant to clap eyes on it but, boom, it was right there. Z saw a scan, saw your name on it, and we put some things together. He actually has an idea of what's creeping in your creep-o head, you damn creep."

Will laughs a breath. "Glad to hear it. But how am I gonna live it down if Zeller saves my damn creepy life?"

"God," she gasps. "You're right. I should have thought of that before," she slaps his arm. "Write him a fucking thank-you note and get him a gift card to Dave & Busters. He's a total skee ball hoe."

Will blinks. "Skee ball hoe. Incredible."

"Well, that's about all I think you're entitled to, good citizen." She leans over and kisses his cheek. "Will? Get some more rest, huh? You still look terrible. And. I'll come by with the card - we all threw in for something for Bella. You can take credit with us and sign on. Don't worry about all this, okay? By the time you get back on your feet, the Bureau will have scrubbed you and replaced half the BSU. Lit a fire under them. They still have to find Gideon and they're out for the Ripper's blood." She pushes his hair back behind his ear. "From what I hear?" she whispers, "Hannibal wouldn't let you out of his sight for the first 48 hours. I think you're in good hands. I think... you should give life a shot. Okay? Give him a shot."

Give him a shot.
Will nods.

"Little stiff," she pretends to grump. "But he's an okay guy. You could do worse." She plucks at one of his curls and flicks his ear. "Take it easy, McCreeperson."

"You too Miss Geekerson."

She smiles, still, and he's glad to remember that the next time he wakes up, even if he isn't glad to recall the rest of her tidings.

«»

Alana was. Beautiful. And brilliant. And fucking fast and clever and hilarious.

God, she was classy. She was classy and elegant.

She was.
She kissed great and it would have... it just would have been nice.

She was stunning sometimes. She was a good friend, and an amazing woman the rest of the time.

It would have been fun with her. He would have liked to see her and... give her stuff... watch her play with the dogs in the spring.

He hopes it was painless, at the very least. But, Abel Gideon being who he is, that's unlikely.
When Hannibal shows up at the foot of his bed pulling lids from soup bowls, the first thing out of his mouth can't be 'Was it open-casket?'

Hannibal is alive and well. Hannibal is a part of how he goes on living.

It's not like Will wanted to be surrounded by Alana's hundreds of friends. Or wanted to see the angle of her nose on her mother's face. Or see happy photographs of her dispersed through the casseroles at the wake, knowing she probably died in agony.

"Smells good."

Hannibal explains what it is and it's basically... chicken soup.

If he weren't in a hospital bed with half his social circle dead, Will might be more thrilled by the way Hannibal pauses and agrees.

Yeah. Fancy ingredients.
Chicken fucking soup.

Hannibal sets the small table across the room and helps drag him up, out of bed.

Will lets him handle more of his weight than necessary. He puts an arm over Hannibal's shoulders and finds him firm. Steady and solid. The physical equivalent of the mental centerpoint he's become for Will.

Walking is good. He's been poking around the hospital and isn't as unsteady as he expected to be. Still. He lets his friend help him because he knows, for some reason, he needs to.

Hannibal pulls the chair from the other side of the table and next to his own.

This is a swank hospital room compared to others he's seen. Either Hannibal knows someone on staff or... he paid for it. Either is likely. The privacy and space are nice. And huddling together over soup is nice, too.

"I have moved appointments around. I was too distracted by all the recent events to focus on my patients properly, I fear."

"So you made soup. And came to tell me what's been happening, I hope."

He stirs his soup and sips some. Nods.

"Beverly... let me in on some of it," he admits.

Hannibal pauses, a bit pained by that, it seems. But he has patients. He has a life that had to go on. And Will didn't collapse at the bad news without him there.

He puts his spoon aside. "I am sorry, Will."

He hasn't touched his own bowl yet. But he swallows and nods and takes up his spoon. "Don't know if I can handle, um. Focusing on the particulars quite yet."

Hannibal picks his spoon up, too. "I hope you don't mean the particulars as cases," he tests.

Really, he doesn't know how to think of any of it. Clearly Hannibal's as angry at Jack dead as he was at him alive.
"There's to be a hearing, within the ranks of the FBI, about how to compensate you for Jack's actions. Who to discipline, if anyone. The general opinion, so far, is that no one would have died if you had been tended to. My official opinion as well as... Alana's are on record. And now," he glances over his shoulder. "I glanced at your chart. You don't mind?"

"No, 'course not."

"The diagnosis surprised me, much to my shame. Non-NMDA-receptor Encephalitis. It makes sense now, of course, but I wonder at Doctor Sutcliffe's initial diagnosis in light of what they've discovered here. Will, I truly am sorry. I didn't know Daniel had lost his way so much. I certainly wouldn't have put you under his care if I had."

"That's not the kind of thing you can always know," Will shrugs. "People don't always flat-out tell you when they're suicidal. The doctor probably wanted to... I donno, protect his reputation? I'm not sure. But that's not your fault. This- Encephalitis? That's something he might not have noticed, right?" Will shrugs. "I mean, with more tests-"

Hannibal dabs at his mouth and shakes his head. "To a man as skilled as he is-- was, on the contrary, there's no way he couldn't have known. He wished to analyze the scan without me - if I had stepped up and refused, even I would have spotted it." He puts his hand to Will's arm. "I... could have requested, perhaps-"

Will shakes his head, as much from denial as confusion. "You were giving us privacy. Seriously, this isn't on you. Hannibal. If he would have known- if he did know? What would his endgame be telling me differently? He had to have assumed I might get a different opinion, or it would have been discovered by someone else. Right?"

He sighs. "I truly don't know. I wish I did. I am..." he hesitates. "Will," his voice is soft. "Despite all these grim recent events, I still feel so strongly-" He stops. Cut himself off. He can't seem to put it all together so Will attempts to absorb the feeling. Help him express it.

The lines of his mouth, the shy of his eyes, the angle of his shoulders, and the shortened breaths. Will realizes how angry Hannibal is. "Jack. Now Sutcliffe. I mean. You're... pissed. People lying and-- I mean Abigail, of all people, has been more truthful with us than the people we know." He might be angrier than Will is and he's got all right to it. Though Sutcliffe and Crawford? They're both gone. It's not like they could do him any harm, now. So Will's own anger has been tempered a bit.

Hannibal's hasn't.

They share that confusion. Betrayal. Their mourning for Alana.

But Will eyes Hannibal, feeling something unexpected. Seeing it in his eyes, in brief moments.

Anger, yes, but when the tide pulls back it exposes... relief. An ending met messily, but almost bordering on victory.

Honestly, Hannibal has a right to vindication. Jack was just as abusive as Hannibal was trying to convince Will he was.

And Gideon got Alana, yes. But here they both sit. Spared by the Ripper and the Fake Ripper both.

Startling as it might seem in anyone else, Will can't be surprised that he feels acceptance and success in Hannibal's presence. To Will, after all, no one is more reliably stable and constant. It's likely that Hannibal has done his mourning and chosen, already, to keep living in defiance of the forces that broke two of his friends. Death may have pulled people away from him but he knows how to keep
living.

Will feels this. Breathes it in. Tries to 'borrow' it and look forward, himself, with the benefit of Hannibal’s vision.

It's not so bad. And better than drowning in guilt or sorrow.

And the two of them still remain for Abigail, even in the face of horror.

"Has anyone checked on Abigail?" Will's heart trips, hoping Alana wasn't with her when it happened. Surely Beverly would have thought to mention-

"Safe and prospering. She's fine, Will. I saw her, myself, yesterday. She needs time to mourn for Alana. But she was also worried for you." Hannibal smiles. "She wishes to see you whenever you're prepared to have company."

Will's heart reverses course and trips for a different reason. "Wow."

"We will move on from this. You will see. After a course of medication and with time to recover, perhaps things can move on and up. Fresher than before."

He realizes he's been just blinking at Hannibal for a while when he puts a hand to Will's head, checking him for fever again. "I know you're just beginning your recovery, but you should eat as much as you can." He touches Will's cheek before letting his hand fall away. "And no need to be worried about your diagnosis. I can explain. There will be a schedule of drugs, but you'll be quite alright."

They're alive - him and Will and Abigail - and that's what means most to Hannibal. He's focused his priorities. He knows who's important to him.

Will wants that. Will is a mess. Other than confused and a little regretful, he isn't sure how to feel. Accepting that Jack misused him, Sutcliffe might have lied to him, the Ripper is still killing, Gideon is MIA, and Alana, a true friend and a good person, is dead. These are strange and conflicting events. And now Abigail is worried about him.

Maybe only a few of those things - the few things he can set hands on - are important. Abigail, Hannibal. What they have. The way they are and what they can be to each other in the future.

His hand comes up. He reaches out. He touches Hannibal's wrist. Watches him go still. "They didn't come near you?" He knows neither the Ripper nor Gideon had reason to. Unless they followed Will home in his fever. But he has to hear it.

"Nowhere close," Hannibal folds his other hand over Will's for a moment. Pats it and lets go. "Please try to eat more, Will."

He nods. It's not really a challenge to polish off the bowl with the nausea receding from the illness. It really is delicious. And he wants to put the chef at ease.

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Hannibal urges Will to draw a line between himself and the Bureau. If there's any reason they think Gideon will come after them, Will thinks he should know about it. But he also doesn't want to look at the new Chesapeake Ripper case files. Doesn't want to know how Jack was splayed and emptied when they found him.
He wants his back pay.
And he wants to recover.

He wants peace after all this.

Beverly has to tell him one more thing, though. She calls his phone and Will puts it on speaker.

Sutcliffe was letting him burn on purpose. Zeller is still going through his notes and files. He was gonna use Will to write a damn case study when, after a few drug doses, he could have been home, safe, and well.

Hannibal is livid.

It's good to have somebody on his side.

He takes a minute, outside Will's hospital room. He doesn't like being angry when Will can feel it so clearly.

Nice as the idea is, Will kinda thinks Hannibal should share the load with things like that. He pours his mind and heart out to Hannibal all the time. There's no reason for him to be alone.

Not now. Now that their social circle is a few people short.

And now that things are not-so-subtly changing.

He wakes up one morning with Hannibal in the plush chair next to his bed. Like when he sat with Abigail after the attack.

His features are slack in sleep. Normally Will isn't free to stare. He does now. Arranges his knowledge of Hannibal's personality into his big, powerful body, his neat look, his foreign background, his refined tastes and adventurous palate. And the fact that he's here.

He cares about Will.
Will is really starting to wonder how deep that goes.

Hannibal is steady and still. Keeps himself contained.

He did a better job of that months back, when they just started to talk. But now Will knows the differences he'll be able to spot when other people are around. Hannibal changes from friend to host.

Will likes both of those guys. The inscrutability bothers him sometimes. And the ostentation. But Hannibal wears his wealth like a man who truly doesn't know life without it. It didn't make him pompous; it just made him a little too sure of himself.

As proven by Sutcliffe's diagnosis -- Hannibal was in agreement about his initial warning, that mental illness was the likely culprit. Even as he offered Will other options, Hannibal was pretty sure about the neurologist's reported results because Will's fear and Sutcliffe's lies backed him up.

He's accepted his error with regrets. But he isn't sorry the illness drove Will out of the Ripper's line of sight.

For his part, Will's gotta admit, he'd rather be sick and alive and staring at Hannibal than dead and displayed at Jack Crawford's side.

And now? He kind of wants to distance himself from those atrocities more. If not for his own well-being...
Then for Hannibal's.

It's strange that he doesn't want to let go. Being close to Hannibal feels good. New and good.

They have a kind of chemistry. Or maybe not chemistry, more a kind of-- an understanding and separation. For as social as Hannibal is, when Will feels far-removed from regular human interaction and social display, he gets the sense that Hannibal is right there with him, somewhat off to the side or aloof. Observing. Trying too hard not to let anyone else sink their teeth in.

Trying not to share of himself.

Except, it seems, as it comes to one another.

Hannibal's been cautious about not sinking his teeth into Will. He's made recommendations, made his arguments and taken sides. But he doesn't tell Will what to do. He doesn't imply that Will might regret it if he doesn't take advice - or if he's not, for example, open to therapy.

Will never wanted to own a responsibility towards Hannibal and a friendship somehow evolved without that kind of obligation sewn in.

Now it just feels as if they're beside one another.

That feels better to Will than he expected of any possible romantic relationship at this point in his life.

It really is healthy to put other people before yourself if you've established that your own priorities are damaging. Caring for someone is the least fucked-up thing that could come out of this whole mess. If that's what happens in the wake of these murders, Will feels okay looking forward to that.

Hoping for it, almost.

Will doesn't mind it when Hannibal touches him. It's doctorly and caring for the most part, though it's lost that medical objectivity lately.

He turns to his side, now and puts two fingers around Hannibal's wrist to feel his pulse. Strong and steady. Placing his hand back on the arm of the chair wakes him.

"Sorry," Will whispers.

Hannibal blinks, shakes his head. "Good morning."

"Missed you, had to bug you," he grins.

Hannibal smiles, too. He reaches to take hold of Will's wrist, in return, though not in a measuring way. His thumb moves back and forth a bit on his arm. "Abigail was restless. She asked if you needed help with the dogs. I hope you don't mind that I introduced them."

Will perks and sits up. "No, that's great. Did she like them?"

He nods, still smiling. "She decided to play with them. Keep them fed. She set up a tent in your living room. I admit I was baffled at first, but she seemed pleased."

Will laughs. "That- that's great. Thanks. Thanks for doing that. And for helping her. For always helping her. You're great with her."

The grip stays steady on his arm as Hannibal sits up, comes closer. "You will be, as well. In time."
It just takes time. Yeah. He knows. Maybe if she likes his dogs and his house, she'll like him a little more. Not likely that she'll ever forget what he did. But maybe she'll decide to be okay with him. In time.

"No appointments?"

"Not through this week. I have your prescriptions. Would you like to go home?"

Oh fuck yeah. He nods.

Paperwork.

A good lecture from his nurse who throws not one nervous glance over her shoulder at Hannibal.

And a few hours later, Will doesn't expect him to turn the car towards Wolf Trap for some reason. But Hannibal does.

He realizes he's about to go back to being more alone than before. Yes, he needs his rest, and, yes, that's where his dogs and his house are. But he doesn't especially want to lose Hannibal's company. He doesn't know if he'll be able to hold his own when the Bureau comes knocking.

With the fever heat of Encephalitis receding, the world looks bright and pleasant. The people all busy activity and, further into Virginia, the snow pristine and untouched.

When the Bentley creeps up the path to the house, Abigail steps out and shields her eyes from the sun.

The dogs are too busy adoring her to run for freedom. They hang around her ankles, looking up, tails wagging all wild.

When Will finally steps out, a few of them rush him.

He falls into a pile with them. God, he loves them.


Hannibal hangs back with Abigail, watching, until Will's knees are soaked and he gets badgered about making himself sick again.

"Hey," Abigail greets him. "Nice place. Sorry I didn't make it out to the hospital."

"Um. It's fine. How are you? No problems with anybody?" He moves to prop the door open.

"No," she laughs. "They're all really sweet."

The tent is still set up in the living room and the fireplace is lit, keeping the cold out.

"So I'm dying to know," she follows him in, dogs trailing her everywhere, "what happened with that?" She points at the poorly-repaired wall.

"Um."

"Trapped raccoon," Hannibal jumps in smoothly for him.

"A raccoon?" she frowns and looks around. "You didn't adopt it, too?"
"Ah-ha, well," he laughs, at a loss.

"It's a joke," she assures him after a moment. "Hey, sit down or something, you still don't seem like you're keeping up with. You know. The regular flow of conversation."

Hannibal agrees with her and comes to collect his coat. "Go shower. Don't mind us. Abigail? The kitchen."

She flashes a smile. "I saw that one coming. Come on, puppers." She riles the dogs in to following her across the house. They go, tongues lolling and scrambling to be the first Good Boy.

Hannibal hangs up Will's coat and follows him to his dresser. "We'll make lunch and you can settle back in while I return Abigail to the facility."

He can't help his frown. "So soon?"

"I'm already bending the rules. I've had Abigail since Alana's funeral. It will take some time to change her directive paperwork and get her released. After that, I really don't see why she can't take one of my guest rooms. She needs a reset with respect to her therapy after all that's happened. We'll figure something else out."

If she's at Hannibal's place, Will ought to be able to see her more.

Hannibal follows him up to the bathroom, carrying his things and a towel.

"One more issue I was hoping you'd take some time to think about while I return Abigail," he hands everything over and watches Will until he stops moving things around and turns back. "How are you feeling, Will?"

"I'm... fine. Good as I can be. The meds have wiped my dreams out, so. It was nice to get a few restful days of sleep. Like, actually restful."

Hannibal nods. "I'm glad." He hesitates. "I know you need significant time alone. I do understand that, Will. When I'm too much for you or-"

He laughs a little. "Um. I'll let you know if that happens but. I mean. It won't be today. You won't be too much. Just for the record. I kind of." He hasn't wanted to say this and has desperately wanted to say this at the same time, for several weeks now. He scratches his head and shifts.

Actually, he'd thought it was pretty telling that he'd walked from the edge of town to Hannibal's place at the height of the fever.

He'd been headed somewhere safe. It felt like he was being too obvious, afterwards.

"Kind of been... associating you with the idea... of, um, home lately. Messed up as it sounds," he whispers.

Hannibal's movements are unsure and shifting, like his, but a glance up shows his merciless eyes. Intent. Staring. Drinking up any information Will's willing to give.

"We've been house-hunting," he comments. "That may be the source of the association."

"I know," he laughs. "House-hunting for places with no yards, though," he flops a hand at his surroundings.

Like, it feels blatant. Him jumping into Doctor Lecter's realty situation and slowly forcing Hannibal
to look at places with acres of land he wouldn't care to maintain. Staying at Hannibal's place and taking refuge in him on a regular basis.

But sometimes we forget we aren't the center of the world. And not everyone's a fucking mind reader. So. It has to be said. And that's as close as he can get to the words right now.

Confusion crosses Hannibal's features. So Will... just navigates away from the point. "What did you need me to brainstorm on?"

Hannibal is silent. His way of forcing eye contact. He does wait for Will to look up again. "I emailed you a list from Mr. Mesidor. I haven't had time to review or narrow it down. When you're fully rested, would you take a look at it?"

Right. So he just admitted he was changing Hannibal's house hunt to suit his own needs.

And Hannibal just asks him to keep doing it.

Woah boy.

Will kinda likes the way Hannibal has changed him. He wonders if Hannibal is starting to like the mess Will has redecorated his life into, too.

"Sure."

Hannibal nods. "Thank you, Will. Take your time, Abigail and I will be arranging a meal."

Will nods, too. "Just shut the dogs out of the kitchen if they don't stop begging. They won't know what they're missing out on, it won't start a riot."

"Alright." He's standing really close. Will doesn't even notice how close until he starts backing up. And drifts back downstairs.

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Time jumps, but not for any other reason than he fell asleep at his desk reading property listings.

He doesn't know what woke him until he hears the front door open.

Gideon is still missing, so his heart jumps into his throat and he rushes for the front room--

Hannibal is letting himself in.

With even more damn groceries than he left here, in his kitchen, for Abigail.

Will takes a breath. Stretches some. Then goes to help him with his bags.

_Reusable, designer shopping totes._ Honestly. The man can't be stopped.

He grins at Will as they wade through the dogs to put everything away.

"Couldn't help yourself, I see."

"Your pantry? Is a disgrace. I don't know how you survived."

"Thanks for not leaving Abigail here with just some half-used condiments and my deep, bachelor shame. She would have made fun of me at double the rate she already managed."
"I believe her mocking was out of concern, Will."

"I know, I'm sure it was. That doesn't make it any less true." They work on storing the groceries. Will has never seen his fridge this full. "Is this my homework?" he finally leans back against the counter, setting the last bag aside.

Hannibal hands him an apple, no sticker, no bright, false sheen. He turns to wash it and finds a knife. Suspiciously sharper than it was the last time he used it.

He halves, then quarters the apple. On the gleaming countertop.

"Possibly," Hannibal accepts a quarter. "Or hands-on experience, if you'll allow me to stay and make a dinner for you." He moves back to the fridge and opens it to point at lumpy bags full of bloody meat. "I thought you might also be interested in how to make dog food. Homemade is likely more nutritious for your animals."

Will's taken aback. "Didn't really ever think about it. Um. Kind of amazing that you'd care."

Hannibal gives him a withering look and closes the door again. "You find it surprising that the things which matter to you might also matter to me?"

Jesus. That forces Will to bite into the apple and look away.

That sounds like caring about the things your partner cares about. Not that friends can't do the same thing, but Hannibal also stocked his entire kitchen.

And slept at his bedside last night.

He plays with the idea of asking Hannibal what his intentions are, here, but if this is just the kind of friendly behavior other people have already been experiencing by sharing kitchen duties at his home, Will doesn't want them to be awkward straight through dinner.

And what Hannibal lost this week kinda tops what Will has. Alana and Jack? They had dinners with him all the time. Alana was a student, an assistant, a colleague for years before Will met Hannibal. Jack met with Hannibal all the time. He has no idea how often.

The point is, they were average people with social circles and friendships. And they were ripped out of Hannibal's orbit.

This may well just be a grab for normality. A way to get back in the kitchen and cope.

Will can fill in the gaps for Hannibal without making it weird. Feels like he owes him that.

"When do you need to take your next doses?"

"Uh." Will leans to look at the stove clock. "Bout an hour?"

"You don't have a timer set?" he presses.

Will sighs. "I guess I should do that."

He feels Hannibal's eyes on him for a long moment while he tries to stretch out the crick in his neck from nodding off at the desk. "Would you mind terribly... coming back to Baltimore for the evening?"
Will blinks at him.

"I feel anxious about leaving you alone on your first night outside the hospital." He shrugs. "I could return you first thing in the morning. Or we could see if Mr. Mesidor can accommodate us tomorrow for more tours."

"Um." He looks around and... yes he missed the dogs. But it's pretty clear that Hannibal isn't admitting how anxious he is. And neither of them are talking about Gideon right now, but both of them kind of are. He looks back to Hannibal - still staring - and drops his eyes before he nods.

"Thank you, Will. I genuinely appreciate it." He smiles, soft and pure and Will is just... trying to realistically accept that these looks are coming his way, now. "Shall we feed you, or the dogs, first?"

"We can- well. Actually, I need to eat so I can take the pills, I guess."

Hannibal points at him. "That's the correct answer I was looking for."

They're crammed in closer than they were in Hannibal's kitchen, of course. Hannibal is warm and moves rhythmically next to him, chopping and tossing things in the pan, pounding meat out flat, crushing herbs. He keeps Will away from the hot stove, working on a dough that's cool and sticky in his hands.

The inevitable itchy nose attacks him when his hands are completely covered and he laughs.

Hannibal just raises an eyebrow as Will tries to rub it away with his wrist and manfully does not roll his eyes when he realizes what the problem is. He washes his hands and.... rubs at the top of Will's nose with his thumb.

"Aww, thanks," Will grins. "You shouldn't indulge, though, I'll start to get itchy all over."

Hannibal laughs and scratches his back in a long, pleasant drag as he walks past again, to the oven. That was... nice.

Will didn't consciously decide not to picture Hannibal naked below him, clawing up his bare back.

So that accidentally happens.

And he tries. *Really tries* not to flirt.

But then they have a weird lesson about how to make *shapely buns*.

And then, after those are in the oven and Will runs out of things to help with, Hannibal asks if his neck is sore.

And he lies and says it isn't.

And keeps rubbing at it.

And Hannibal asks to try something. Asks if it's alright to touch him.

And he stands behind Will and kneads at his neck and shoulders for four full minutes. *Four.*

And under the powerful ministrations and, frankly, heavenly pressure, Will is just about ready to admit he's a little bit fucked, here.
"Will, I feel I must apologize," Hannibal stops him before he closes the guest bedroom door for the night. They didn't leave the house until long after the excitement from the dogs died down. They were thrilled to be fed by Hannibal, it seemed, and when Will tried to walk with them after they ate, they just trailed adoringly after Doctor Lecter like they had Abigail.

Wrangling them wasn't so bad, though. Not even the betrayal he dramatically whined about. "What for?"

He hangs back, hesitant. He does that around Will a lot more lately. Since after Tobias Budge, really. He does it when he has something he maybe shouldn't say, but feels like he has to. Because of Will. "I didn't intend to crowd you. Or pressure you into coming back here tonight. I may have crossed the line in invading your personal space in the midst of your recovery. With your sensitivities, I-"

Alright. Deep breath here.

"You'd be doing me a favor," he has to interrupt, "if you wouldn't take it back unless you wanted to for yourself. Hannibal. I'm a grown-up. If I wanted you to back off I'd say so. But you're. You're-you." He motions vaguely. "You're... in my life. And that's-- it's nice. I don't mind," so quiet he can barely even hear himself, fumbling the words but getting them out all the same. Admitting it. He wasn't thinking of awkward encounters or physicians or his own half-inept sexual history when Hannibal was touching him. He was maybe hoping a little bit. Hoping for something new. Something different. Enhancing what is, seemingly, already right here inside his life already.

He can see it. He's already on the next step, to be honest. Maybe too far ahead - trying to prepare himself to accept what might be offered.

Trying to deserve it.

Hannibal warned him. He broadcasts his movements when around Will. He's aware of Will's sensory issues and overactive imagination and, honestly, the only thing he's really worried about when it comes to getting lost in translation between them is if maybe he's seeing something that Hannibal doesn't really intend.

Maybe he's reading too much into them.

Or maybe he's even managing mourning like an idiot. Like he doesn't even know if he's dealing with Alana's death in a fucked-up way. Maybe even Hannibal isn't grieving properly because they're tied in knots over here.

That could, possibly, account for why he wants to grab Hannibal by his business-casual lapels and drag him into bed and breathe into his mouth and sit on his lap and-

He didn't even realize how close they were standing. Again.

Will is getting through the tail-end of a prolonged illness. Major life changes. A good friend died. His boss died. He quit his job. He's trying to get a teenager to not hate him. Shopping for bougie houses and starting to wonder if he could stand living in them. He's kind-of-sort-of in therapy with someone who might just be the best friend he has.

It doesn't seem like he's the only one who's suddenly aware of this, given the apology and Hannibal's expression.
So he braces for more regrets from Hannibal. Wonders if it will be harder when they wake up in the morning and try to tour houses together with Hannibal's reluctance hanging between them.

Hannibal nods. His eyes wander as he mulls it over. And then he straightens up. And he doesn't retreat from Will's personal space. He says, "In that case, I'll simply wish you goodnight. Knock if you should need absolutely anything."

His eyes... linger down Will's body just a little. Just enough, really.

But then he moves down the hall.
And doesn't repeat his apologies.

Okay, then.

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Hannibal's house is tall and deep. Will wouldn't be able to hear him in the kitchen, but his sense of the man tells him that breakfast is already being arranged for.

Maybe there will be a knock on the door and a coffee.

Maybe Will shouldn't allow that until after he's had a cold shower and decided not to drag Hannibal into the room anyway.

He had a fresh round of nightmares last night. And it freaked him out. He must not have screamed. Or if he did, he was left to tough it out on his own.

He got a couple towels out of the adjoining bathroom so he didn't soak through Hannibal's mattress.

First, sweating and still rattled, he turned to that fantasy and finished it out instead of the bad dream. Yanking Hannibal into the room and getting himself taken hard. He jerked off in the bathroom. Not the most welcoming feeling, but more polite than the bed, as a guest. And maybe he should gauge the likelihood of an immediate visit from his host before he rewinds to start his fantasy over again, in the shower.

He pulls his shirt back on, almost completely dry, though probably still reeking of fear sweat, and quietly opens the door. At the top of the stairs he should be able to hear the hiss of food on the stove, but he doesn't.

He smells coffee. And something fresh underneath it but not nearly as strong. Like Hannibal pulled the ingredients out and started but wasn't able to finish making a dish.

Two voices. The steady, familiar precision of Hannibal's heavily-accented English.

And the dry snark of Abel Gideon.

He rushes on quiet, socked feet back down the hall. He doesn't have his weapon. Hannibal had taken his gun from him when he showed up, deep in the fever. The FBI hasn't requested it back yet. (They've been kinda busy.)

He turns to Hannibal's room and... really feels weird about the intrusion. But he goes in, wondering where the sensible, inexperienced doctor would stash a firearm he probably thought of as distasteful.

Will walks into the massive closet and tries to work against intuition. Tries to spot a place no one would spot in a split second. Somewhere safe and unlikely.
A couple dozen shoes shelved, neat and in order. None of them in boxes. There's one small chest. Out in the open, but up high.

He has to climb a little to reach it. He's careful not to knock anything over, alerting Gideon to someone upstairs.

Under a stack of envelopes and a neat bundle of cash, no gun. Fuck.

He doesn't have time to look anywhere else. If he starts flinging drawers, Gideon will know someone else has an opportunity to ambush him.

There's something - looks like camping equipment or a neatly rolled bag. He pulls it off the shelf on a hunch and opens the snap. Unrolls it. An old set of chef's knives, German etched into the blades. Well-kept and sharpened. He pulls one that hefts well in his hand and leaves everything else on the floor.

Low and quiet down the stairs. Gideon taunting Hannibal, his voice rising through the tall house, talking nonsense, blood, and guts. Bragging about Chilton. Looking for a friend.

He's in Hannibal's kitchen. That seems like more of a violation to Will than that he went into Hannibal's private space, himself.

From the way the sound bounces, they're shifting as they talk. Hannibal must be backing towards the outside door. Circling each other slowly, and at a distance. If he waits, Will can come in the hall behind Gideon.

But if he waits, Gideon might also close in on Hannibal. He's had a thirst for psychiatrists lately. That can't happen to Hannibal. That can't happen. What the fuck would Will do without him? Fuck.

There are the reflective surfaces to consider. He doesn't want Gideon to see movement behind himself.

Will sees that the table was being set when Hannibal was interrupted. He moves back, listening for a rush in Gideon's voice or panic in Hannibal's.

If he goes really low.
Like really low.

Maybe Gideon won't see him creep in. But it still has to be done fairly quickly.

And he has to hope Gideon is wearing the boat shoes he was comfortable in as a free citizen, not the boots he stole from the men he killed in his escape.

Will takes a few breaths, as deep as he dares.
Then steadies himself, lets his training take over.

Without a gun he feels slightly naked but he flips the blade in his hand so the swing isn't awkward. He could take another knife from the silverware on the table but he doesn't want a clatter and he wants this over with now. If Gideon gets anywhere nearer to Hannibal, Will's gonna-

He hangs outside the doorway until Gideon must have paced in front of the fridge.

Will slides, silent, back tight to the wall. Steels himself and glances into the kitchen.

He sees Gideon. He's paced further forward than Will would like, but now Will can't turn back - if
Hannibal's eyes should give him away, he loses the element of surprise.

He is low.
He slides close.
Not second-guessing at all.
Low, now. And steady.

And simply slices the tendons behind Gideon's ankles.

He goes down with a howl and a scramble, blood everywhere and an undignified snarling. "Your fucking pet," he spits. "Slippery little bastard." He claws at the floor, suddenly turns and yanks open a low drawer-

Will's got no idea what's in there - and Gideon fell way too close to Hannibal.

Will pops up, lunges forward and, both hands wrapped around the knife hilt, slams it down into Gideon's gut. He screams. Grabs for Will's hands.

From above, a flash.

Will looks up just in time to see Doctor Lecter finish sliding a massive knife from the block on the counter, flips it in his hand, and, point-down, drops and plunges it into Gideon's chest.

The hand that was scrambling for Will's wrist splays, a shock of pain, and-- drops away.

Gideon's head lolls, wide-eyed on the floor, staring at Hannibal.

But dead.

Blood is pooling down from both wounds and Will is kneeling in blood from the split tendons. He makes his hands let go of the knife like unsticking them from a frozen pipe.

Hannibal is motionless, his hands still on his own knife. He pulls his up-

Or tries to.

But there was such power behind the drop and stab that he must have lodged the blade tip in the floor beneath Gideon.

So he just lets go. Breathes deep for a moment. Reaches to check Gideon's pulse at his neck.

His blood is sluggish across the floor and he doesn't blink. Hannibal doesn't say anything. He looks up and finds Will's eyes. Nods.

Reality doesn't go anywhere. Time doesn't skip. Will sits back on his haunches and moves to stand but slips in the blood.

His hands are spattered from the slices. He doesn't want to make a mess of Hannibal's counter by using it to lever himself up. It doesn't occur to him, in this moment, that the ship has pretty much sailed on that one.

Hannibal rises and steps over the body to come to him. He is uncharacteristically casual in loose red pants and only a gray shirt. In the wake of death, in the first rolling tide of shock, Will's mind wanders. He looks at his arms and wonders if Hannibal could have choked Gideon on his own with muscles like that.
Will really never did quite appreciate what was under those suitcoats until now, seeing the short sleeves ride up far on Hannibal's arms.

It feels like he can't think good thoughts? Like every damn thing he thinks is entirely inappropriate and he better not open his mouth.

He doesn't want to ruin Hannibal's clothes, either, but he brooks no argument in helping Will stand up from the slippery floor, sharing the stains of Gideon's blood as they transfer, no matter how careful Will tries to be.

Accidentally smearing a crime scene on his friend.
Oh, god.

"Will." That's all he says, but it sounds like a demand. It's actually a request for permission. It snaps Will's attention to his eyes and he doesn't need to know what the permission is for; he has it. Whatever he wants. As long as he's alive and unharmed and here and Gideon didn't touch him and Will didn't let him die like he did to Abigail's mom.

His hand rattles when it comes up and reaches for Hannibal.

Arms come around him, first, and turn him gently away from the sight of the body. Will's hands tangle in the fabric of Hannibal's shirt, gripping too hard. He slowly moves Will out of the kitchen.

It feels like he can. And he wants to. So Will closes his eyes and presses his head into Hannibal's neck.

His voice is soft and his words are foreign, but even if Will can't understand Hannibal's mother tongue, he thinks this must be praise. Pure and reverent.

Like he's the holy ghost and Hannibal takes his blood unto himself and has found reason to sing and to glory and to pray in it.

«»

The FBI swarms Hannibal's home an hour after the 911 call.

It feels like Will in the walk-in closet, climbing on the shelves.
And Gideon in the kitchen, befouling the floor.

It feels like a violation of Hannibal's space.

Hannibal sat him down and went to get a robe. He disappeared for a few minutes but then he came back and bundled Will up in a sheet and sat with him and spoke soft, awed nonsense to him in Lithuanian, rubbing his back and pressing his head to Will's shoulder until the local police arrived. He only distances himself when the lab crew come in, the people Will knows, Beverly and Z and Price. Will understands that he has to explain things and give his account of what happened but he instantly misses Hannibal's hand sat low on his back, the slow, warm circles he would make. He's cut up an apple and made Will eat it so he could take his meds. The coffee was cold, but he smuggled it out of the kitchen before it became another piece of the crime scene.

Beverly speaks with the rest of the team and breaks away to come to him. She tweaks his nose and takes the spot Hannibal vacated. "Nice improvisation. We're proud of you," she grins.

"Well. I had help."
"Yeah! The call said it was some fancy knifework, I can't wait to see it," she enthuses. "What did he say? Was he monologuing at Hannibal? Like a real life supervillain?"

"Yeah, for like a while? It was ridiculous. He practically handed me that one. I mean I wasn't really listening my... my ears were too full of my own breath? But. He called me a bastard. And then he grabbed for something - I don't know, a kitchen tool maybe. And. And." He just shrugs.

She gives him this little nod. This satisfied look. And she puts up her fist. "You gotta blow it up with me, come on."

So he untangles his hand from the sheet. And they bump fists. And blow it up because they're dorks.

"Will Graham, you are vicious," comes Zeller's voice. He wanders his way back into the room and over to them. Points at Will. "Took a fucking knife to the calcaneal tendons. That is ruthless, man."

Beverly nods approvingly.

"Achilles heel," Price comes in, pulling on his gloves. "Beautiful slices, too. Dead on and powerfully severed. I'm impressed."

This is... gonna get pervy with them. They enjoy this shit way too much.

"Nice hit to the heart, too. The Doctor did a good job. Though, I suppose, of all people, a doctor should know where to aim," Z adds.

"Gideon definitely messed with the wrong chef," Beverly says. "I'll sample the blood on your knees and then you can go clean up, okay?"

Price nods to Zeller and points to one of the deputies who first arrived, handling an evidence bag.

"Who said he could- hey. Hey, buddy, who said you could move that-" they chase after him into the hall.

Beverly rolls her eyes. "Guess I should get in there, too, before they ruin your work." She drops her voice and checks to see that Hannibal is still talking to the other agent by the front. She's small and smart in her suit. Her firearm is a little too obvious under her jacket. "Our interim boss. Don't worry, she won't steal your man, she just told us her girlfriend's expecting."

He levels a tired glare at her.

"Oh, come on. You're wrapped in his sheets, in your underwear," she plucks at the blanket and he scoots away from the grab, throws the fabric back over his boxers, trying not to flake drying blood anywhere else. She laughs. "Anyway. I'm rooting for you. Plus you just saved his life." She gives him the eyebrows and the knowing nod, swabs blood samples from both his knees. "You're totally getting laid for this."

"Could you go do your job?"

"Text me, I've always kinda wondered how big."

"GO?? PLEASE??"

"Alright, alright," she laughs and rises and pulls some gloves on.

He closes his eyes and takes a moment to cover his head with the sheets and... hide.
"Will?"

Yeah, his slightly-distressed voice brought Hannibal back over. "I'm fine," he says through the sheets.

He feels Hannibal come close. Will lets him pull the blanket open. He's smiling just slightly. "I suspect that's only a little true," Hannibal allows. "The new division chief wants us to vacate the house, unfortunately."

"God, I'm so sorry," Will slumps.

Hannibal takes it in good humor. "I would much rather be alive and with you than dead and still in this house. More reason to sell it, I think."


"I will call to push our appointment back. Though I'm not quite comfortable leaving my property entirely in the hands of the authorities, so I-"

"I can get a ride home," he starts to rise.

"They do need more statements from you," Hannibal calms him but doesn't make him sit again. "I explained your recent condition and the agents had all heard about it. They're allowing me to take you upstairs and back to bed for an hour before forcing us out. They still need my statement. And you do need your rest," he's careful to emphasize. "Gideon never came upstairs, he let himself in the front door. As far as I'm concerned, they needn't pry anywhere but on the ground floor. When they're nearly done, we will leave until after the crime scene cleaners have come and gone."

He rubs Will's arms through the blanket. He's staring at him with the slightest smile still hanging on to his mouth. Like everything Will does is almost precious enough to flutter over.

"Allow me to help you upstairs?"

All Will can do is nod. Hannibal secures the blanket around him and takes his arm to walk him past the deputies and CSIs and up the stairs.

And to his own room.

"Sorry about your-" the closet door is still open, the light still on. "I don't think I broke anything. I was looking for something. Anything that would work against him."

"It will keep for now," Hannibal closes the bedroom door behind them. He urges Will to the side of the bed and he sits.

"The blood-"

Hannibal just shakes his head, unconcerned.

The blanket fell from his head. Hannibal stands close; close enough that he fits a knee between Will's own knees. He picks Will's head up and holds him there. Places his thumbs on his cheeks softly. Stares at him.

Will can't exactly look anywhere else.

"I feel it necessary to preserve your calm for a while. I will keep them away from you with their notebooks as long as possible. Then I will emphasize that, rather than pry, they should pay you for
continuing to do your job better than the FBI. And I will ask them to leave with their body and their evidence when they decline."

He knows that Hannibal's own space is sacred to him. His kitchen now has dozens of nameless people trooping through it, picking little specks up off the floor and confiscating his silverware. It raises Will's ire to think of it that way, even though he knows they're doing their job and that it must be done well. Gideon was a serial killer. Alana's murderer is dead. They will hardly care much about the details. Probably won't even bother processing the samples except to file away.

A serial killer is dead. Someone who took down one of their own who should have been protected. Will and Hannibal should be lauded by any reasonable organization.

But he would settle for the FBI just getting the fuck out of his life. And out of his friend's kitchen.

Will's own hand drifts to top one of Hannibal's. He holds it there and leans into it. "I don't know what-- listen. Hannibal. Whatever Gideon said to you? Ignore him. Please - I know what it does when you let killers worm into your brain. Are you- I mean, you were amazing. Thank you- I didn't thank you. You had to- you were amazing," he repeats. He can't even handle himself, how the hell is he gonna support his friend if he starts to have his own nightmares about Budge and Gideon?

Hannibal shakes his head a little. "Think nothing more of it. Lay down, dear Will," he takes his hands back to loosen the blanket and urge him down.

He pets Will's hair back for another moment, smiling.

He turns the lights back off before he goes.

«»

Bundled in the car, still sleepy.

Silent for a while.

"I didn't thank you in return," Hannibal says, on the ride down to Wolf Trap. "For risking yourself. For taking the necessary steps against Abel Gideon." He glances from the road for a short moment. "You saved my life. Thank you, Will."

He's been hearing that in every move Hannibal has made since Gideon flatlined. Hearing it out loud kind of chokes him up. Hannibal helped, too. He made the final blow and they took down a fucking monster.

Together. They did that together. For one another.

If Gideon had got Hannibal, who would Will have left? He couldn't possibly lean on Abigail. She's got a haunted house in her own head.

Everyone else he's associated with is still in the FBI.

If he didn't stop Gideon, Gideon wouldn't have stopped with Hannibal.

Would he have been more useless to Abigail dead or alive, he wonders.

"Will?" Hannibal calls him softly.

"Of course. Of course," he repeats uselessly. "I mean, thank you," he tries to say again, but Hannibal just smiles and shakes his head and insists that Will did the most.
He doesn't even really have a clean space to offer Hannibal to sleep. His old, sweat-soaked bed, or the tent Abigail set up.

With his keen sight he's probably offended by all the dog hair. With his sense of smell the mattress likely stinks of all Will's past fears.

"I don't have a guest room," he feels guilty saying it. Like he isn't welcoming Hannibal into his life the way he was taken in as recently as last night. This morning.

"I know. There's light left in the day, still. I thought you might do with some time alone. To be with your dogs and breathe the free air. There's no longer a threat of Gideon. Or the FBI, in fact. I need to arrange to have the house cleaned after this morning's business. I have a comfortable place to sleep in my office."

Of course. Yeah, of course they don't have to keep sticking together. He'd just thought-

Will doesn't know what he was thinking. He was leap-frogging over the reality of the situation as if he missed losing time or something. It's not like Hannibal would even want a place to sleep in Will's home if he had one to offer. It's simply not his style. Not something they do.

Will does need time with the dogs. Time to settle back into the rhythm of life. After having the house swarmed by police, it kind of feels like his employment didn't even officially end until just now.

That really is strange.

Hannibal must be right. He must need time to disconnect from that.

A little fear whispers in the back of his skull as he attempts to accept it, naturally.

What if the fever surges again? What if he loses time? Ends up curled on his roof around so many dead dogs and unable to ask for help.

He feels the knife in his hand. Pulses of Gideon's torso as he bucks in pain and tries to get Will off of him.

What if.
What if it really wasn't a physical illness?
What if Sutcliffe and Hannibal were right all along?

What if Hannibal lets go his end of the tether and, floating there, alone in space, Will confronts himself and it's so terrifying he wants to burn it down like Hobbs? Like Stammets? Like Gideon?

It kinda starts to feel like Hannibal makes him stable.

He looks at the shape of that. Tries to decide if he is or is not, as the man who wants to kiss Hannibal, the same man who once desperately tried to kiss Alana.

Gideon's voice was no hallucination. Wounding him, taking him down, wasn't like opening his chimney to free a non-existent animal.

When Hannibal was in danger, Will was right there.
Unlike when Budge went to Hannibal's office with the intent of killing everyone.
Not like when Will was so off his game he put Hannibal in danger, walking from the outskirts of Baltimore to his house with his gun out.

If he were still burning himself at both ends in the FBI, he wouldn't have been there for his friend.
He wouldn't have been where he knows, now, he needs to be.

Neither of them are used to what's been happening. None of this is normal.

Being able to recognize that is even some small victory and he smiles a bit, knowing so.

Some time alone, then. For Hannibal to be his neat-freak self. To fix his home and make peace in his kitchen once more.

Some time alone, then. For Will to let the dogs wriggle and trip all over him. To make the last fix on that boat out back and maybe sell it in town for a few hundred bucks.

Some time to see if time unravels any of this.

And to look, with hope, for what may come next.
Will's first visitor in two days is Abigail.

She hitchhiked and he feels like he should be angry or worried or exasperated but.

She hitchhiked to his house to see him.

Also she has... basically apprenticed to a serial killer before, so he thinks she could probably defend herself just fine. But they don't talk about that.

It's not nice to talk about that. And she wants to do nice things like race the dogs and make him buy junk food that Hannibal wouldn't buy for her and ask what the deal is with his stupid fluffy-feathered fishing flies.

It's awfully nice of her. She rolls her eyes a lot.

He... supposes he's fine with being the dorky parent.

Not that he is a parent. But. You know. The pushover who lets her hitchhike and buy Funyuns and who doesn't fuss when she runs headlong into an unexpected tree with Chester nipping at her heels. (Mainly because he gets to laugh at her that time.)

With all the excitement lately, Hannibal hasn't filed new paperwork as her caretaker, yet. It's still required due to legal issues, even though she's old enough to handle most matters on her own. It means Will has to give her a ride back to the group home the next day. And she doesn't let him talk to the administration or stick up for her when he drops her off. She just puts her hand to the window and smiles and says an inaudible 'bye.'

She stands there on the front steps of the building until he's driven up to the corner and he watches her walk inside from the rear-view mirror.

Since she was around last night, they didn't talk (to protect the identity of all wrongdoers present). But Hannibal calls, after Will gets back home from dropping her off, and Will picks up. He is more lonesome than he expected, and happier to hear from his friend.

He sits on the porch and rocks in his chair and plays half-ass tug-of-war with an old rag between Jessie and Emma.

"I have a confession to make."

"Should I be on a landline for this?" Hannibal teases.

"I don't know. You should probably be where you are and I should probably be where I am. And Abigail is back where she should be."

"You... met her at the home?"

"Mm. No."

"She traveled to your house," he guesses.

"Right in two."
Hannibal simmers on the other end.

"Hey. I know you don't wanna hear it, but I was a little thrilled so. Just let me have that this once."

"I suppose," he says after a pause. "If you returned her yourself?"

"I did."

"It was still reckless of her."

"I don't think she cares. Maybe she's just... living life while she's got it left to live. Hey- she comes to see you all the time, why not me? What kind of shitty double-standard is that, anyway?"

"Of course. Yes. This is true. That doesn't change the fact that it's dangerous every time."

"Hard to find your fear of monsters once you've shared too much with them. It's not the people that scare you. It ends up being yourself that scares you. Yourself and... how much you can endure. And what you would do to keep enduring." He sighs. "Not that I," he gives a breathy laugh, "speak from experience or anything."

Hannibal gives it a long moment. "Will. Would you mind if I took up your time again. Tomorrow? It would, admittedly, be more time than the usual."

"All day? God, let me look at my planner. Let me call my assistant in here, I have no idea if I can fit you in," he has to let the dogs have the old towel and crack open a bottle of water.

There's a smile in Hannibal's voice. "I know it's short notice, but clear your schedule if at all possible. And. Find out if someone can tend to the pack for you. It's actually two days of time I'd be taking up. At the least."

Will takes a moment to think and drink. "We going someplace?"

"Massachusetts and Maine. Jesting aside, if you do have the time, I have need of my teammate."

He perks. "You want to look at houses someplace other than Maryland? I mean. That's great. That gives you a whole new field of kitchens to look into."

"It does. And I'd like to advance the hunt now that my own home has been..." he trails off.


"I would appreciate it, yes. At your earliest convenience."

Shit. He's gotta find a bag and a couple sets of clean clothes. He's gotta sleep some. "I'll call and tell you when I'm almost there."

"Call when you leave Wolf Trap. It should give me time enough to make breakfast for us both."

"Of course it will, what the hell was I even thinking?"

Hannibal laughs. "Until then. Goodnight, Will. Rest well."

He does have to get his shit together. Pack a bag. But he also has to sit here and feel his profound disappointment for a moment.
Maine and Massachusetts.

Hannibal had no inclination to look in Virginia. The District. Not even Delaware.

So, okay.

If Will's going to lose his best - his only - friend? The least he can do is make sure he doesn't stick him with a crappy house.

Will can enjoy these days, at least. This time left with Hannibal, however much may remain.

Maybe it will just end up being him and Abigail, after all.

«»

He starts off grouchier than he intended.

Will slept poorly. His mind hasn't exactly gone quiet.

And Hannibal is thinking about leaving.

Not that Wolf Trap and Baltimore are close, exactly, but they're closer than fucking Maine.

Breakfast is nice. Hannibal took the time to redecorate the dining room to make it feel a little taller, a little more airy. It feels appropriately cleansed, like Abel Gideon never even drew breath inside the house.

And Hannibal doesn't make Will go into the kitchen at all. Doesn't even allow him to help with the dishes.

In the car, Hannibal glosses over the itinerary with a vagueness that can only come from having someone's assistant make all the trifling little arrangements because you're a very busy clinician with a very big bank account.

They have a private flight scheduled and a realtor will meet them with a car in Boston.

Swank.

Hannibal is looking for homes in such a high-dollar range that they seem to see nothing odd with this arrangement. Nothing exorbitant about the costs. They spare no expense.

There's fucking champagne on the plane and the only reason they don't have some is because it's mimosa o'clock and the staff reports that they don't have orange juice. For this crime, Hannibal simply gives the hostess an *eye* like she just did something inappropriate and embarrassing and she scurries back away to retrieve coffee, instead.

Will pushes his glasses higher on his nose when they land at the private airfield and step out to meet Mr. Alvin Ng.

And, "This is my partner, Mr. Graham," Hannibal introduces, a hand hovering low at Will's back, at the same time stepping subtly in the way so he isn't forced to shake Mr. Ng's hand.

The gesture shouts 'protective husband' in a louder voice than any of them could have used in polite company and so Will just. Well. Steps into the role again. Tired little smile, *yes, whatever the Good Doctor wants, he gets, and I'll be picking out the curtains.*
This at least drives the realtor to show a little deference for Will's opinions as they meander the properties. Mr. Ng learns, quickly, to wait for Will and Hannibal to finish volleying back and forth on Hannibal's obvious tastes and well-hidden distastes before pressing them to move on to the next room. And it lends credibility to Will's voice when he turns to Mr. Ng half-way through the day and says, "You're not gonna bother stopping at that high-rise. No. Seriously. You're not."

Ng drives on.

Boston is crowded and miserable.

Will can't possibly banish his fake husband to this wasteland.

«»

The next morning, they're in Maine.

And Maine... isn't so bad.

It really is beautiful. He's been up this way in the summer and Will knows it's even better, then, in the green and the bloom and the fresh warm air.

Knowing that makes the situation doubly awful when they step into the second house on the second day and he knows he's about to lose Hannibal to this place.

Will is going to lose his best friend.

Because this is the one.

It has a feeling to it, when Will walks in, trailing fingers on the front door handle. His breaths feel heavy in his chest and that feels like the house was waiting for them. Watching the horizon for their appearance with its wide windows for eyes.


The company's realtor in Maine, Ms. Holst, doesn't let the homes do the talking on their own, but this house suddenly upstages her; mutes her commentary. Will walks away from Holst and Hannibal to go follow this feeling. To chase the glow of winter's day into the main room where bookshelves climb deep into every angle of one, large wall, the entire south side of the room. The fireplace is tall but not the dominate feature. It lets the furniture star as the owner (or designer? who knows?) set it up. Not precisely Hannibal's style, but close enough to stoke the embers of imagination.

The halls are just bright enough not to be glaring and annoying in the morning. He hears Holst's voice far away. The walls soften her clipped, business-like tone. They mute the rest of the world and narrow the homey sounds of feet, soft on hardwood; fingers skimming doorways; curtains hooked and sliding away from the window to drop sunlight into the rooms. Delicately. Lovingly.

Will can hear himself breathe and it sounds like peace and relief and birdsong from the nearby woods.

Hannibal doesn't prompt Holst along much. Will glimpses them down one hall and sees Hannibal listening. He is stiff and still in the space, like he's not acquainted yet but he'd like the challenge. His presence could only be heightened and accented by this home. It would only make him more. More refined, more elegant, more gathered, more poised. An element of the space; the house would accent the dominance of his stance and figure, if he let it.
His place in Baltimore seems like a fixer-upper in comparison.

The walls and halls, the details and the subtleties, already feel like his friend. Will really feels Hannibal here. After a month, maybe two, of moving in and out of the space, after leaving his own colors and clothing and accents here, every breath of air would feel owned by him.

Almost like he'd already been here before. Almost like the walls were built with him in mind.

The bedrooms have some blues, some greens. Cooling and calming. A contrast to the areas with shelves and desks – reds and blacks and purples, some small shine of silver – colors of thought and action mark those places.

The office is above the main room. The bookcases are set up there like they climbed from downstairs and came right through the floor, continuing, floor to ceiling, their sturdy wood easily matched by the desk in the center of the room.

Will catches up with Hannibal and Holst, moving into the master bedroom. Practically one side of the entire second floor. Double-doors to a balcony, outside, just wide enough for a small table and couple of chairs. A view out over the forest, to mountains and beyond. Fewer windows toward the back, where the bed is. Private and warm. The closet: massive. The bathroom: luxurious. Lingering by the bed makes his heart clench a little from the pure tranquility of the spot.

He knows Hannibal doesn't need his opinion on this one. It's just short (like one floor short) of being a mansion. It's near town but not too near town. It's near the wilds but there are roads enough nearby to stop the majority of bears and moose.

Will slips away from them again.

He needs another long moment to feel this. Another long moment of shock rolling in. Because they found it. This is it.

This is where Hannibal should go. Where he should stretch and settle and rest himself. Where he belongs.

It stings, again. How far they are from Virginia.

It hurts that he's going to have to get used to this.

Probably.

The two of them didn't come off as a couple to Holst, he could tell. Will was a little too grumpy, after Boston, and Hannibal a little too eager to get to the point. So she's only speaking to Hannibal anyway, featuring the non-features and stopping just short of molesting the real features with those dramatic sweeps of her hand.

He has to do this. He has to know. He can't wait for them all to experience it together: Back downstairs, Will finds the kitchen on his own.

And when he walks in.
He knows it really is over.

"Hannibal," Will barely breathes his name.

Will hears his shoes on the floorboards. He doesn't look to his side, but touches Hannibal's wrist when he gets to him. They walk in like that, together.
A long kitchen. Like the master suite, it is so wide it seems as if it is one half of the entire floor. High ceilings. On either end, a massive window, each rounded at the top. Light comes in both sides.

One window faces the front of the property. Trees are in front of it, outside, obscuring the view from the yard. The window on the corner, next to it, is also shaded, a restricted view of the side of the house. This is a breakfast nook with a modest, square table with four chairs. The space is wide enough for the table to sit at an angle, for the diners to be at each corner of the space, none obscuring the light from outside, all with some view. Both blended and separate enough to be a friendly and refreshing space to start the day or an intimate dine-in area of the kitchen. A gauzy-light curtain is pulled to the side if more privacy should be required, though neither the drive nor the street can be seen from that angle. The slab wall of a stone oven connects the space in a warm and inviting way to the kitchen proper. Long counters, endless wood cabinets interrupted occasionally by narrow windows lead to the other side.

The window there hasn't been fitted with any curtain or shade, looking out over the perfect privacy of the back yard. It towers over the set of sinks and is framed, inside, by small potted herbs.

Outside, a garden.

It's dusted with snow at this time of year, but it's shaped like a proper garden. Boxes raising rectangular areas of snow from the surrounding walk. A greenhouse in the far corner of the yard, beyond. It's half-fenced, expressing a property line well beyond the limits of any other yard they've seen. There are posts and either the existing fence fell on one side or it was never completed. That doesn't diminish the yard at all. It's an easy project. One Will wishes he could see to on his own.

A tug behind his ribs. He has to blink away the image of long, peaceful days, sweating and digging, nails between his teeth, setting the remaining fence and plotting an expansion to the garden to fit all Hannibal's deepest desires for... rare herbs and obscure varieties of tomato.

Will comes back to the present where he feels private and warm in this kitchen. It's a kitchen. He's never felt this way about damn kitchens before. Or at least he didn't before Hannibal. The center island has an eight-burner stovetop plus a small, flat griddle. The hood fan is suspended above, on the same truss as some up-lights, illuminating the high ceilings.

Will's hand moves from Hannibal's arm to the countertop. He feels the cool stone without knowing what kind it is, thinking it beautiful. Thinking it all so beautiful.

He looks to Hannibal and thinks him beautiful in this space, too, and he even enjoys the vice-grip behind his ribs as Hannibal's hand chases his across the edge of the counter.

A gap at the other end of the kitchen leads to a doorway, tucked between a set of cabinets and the massive fridge. The two of them only look through the way out, reluctant to leave the kitchen.

It's a dining room. Lightly-toned colors. A wall nearly filled by the seven perfectly symmetrical, tall windows that look back out over the garden, too. The dining table there is dark and wide. Probably not precisely what Hannibal likes, but it wouldn't take much to enhance the space.

They look back to the kitchen. Holst has joined them.

Will blinks away and tries to decide to be more critical of the space.

There are two regular ovens, side-by-side on the opposite wall, behind the island where you'd stand to work over the stove but aside just enough that one person wouldn't be in another's way and the heat wouldn't radiate directly at your back.
He comes around the island and... finds the dishwasher. Check. New equipment and wider than a standard appliance.

There's a small sink in the island for prep. Check. A flexible hose. He pulls it up and out, sees that it extends as far as the first, wide burner. You'd be able to fill a pot without hefting it between the stove and sink.

Hannibal is casting a critical eye to the ceiling. The duct suspended there between the lights is a bit obtrusive.

"That's so the hood fan vents outside," Holst says, seeming to understand, for the first time, that she really doesn't have to do a lick of work in this room.

It's *magical*. Hannibal doesn't have a hood fan at his house right now. One that vents outside is a fucking *treasure*.

Hannibal seems to agree with the wide-eyed look Will sends him. Moves to the stone oven.

He checks around the sides. It looks solid but he asks, "Has this been inspected as far as-"

"The chimney has been cleaned, the stonework sealed. It was a highly custom job, but all of it's airtight," Holst nods.

Will pulls open some of the cabinets. They're not stylish so much as functional. The brass handles are a little dated in design. "Might have to replace these," Will taps one. Then taps along the baseboards with the toe of his shoe listening for... scraping, scurrying, weak wood splintering, whatever.

The old floor throughout the house creaks sometimes, but nothing else does. The stone tile floor here is pale. With the stone oven set into the wall and the high arches of the windows throwing light down on grey and green accents, it feels slightly Tuscan. Tastefully rustic but not out of Hannibal's clean style.

It's perfect in its own way. Not in fact, but in feeling. Almost to Hannibal's tastes but,... subtly curved to the left. Just slightly earthy in a way Hannibal's carefully-constructed boundaries have not traditionally allowed. Except in small cases. Like with Will.

And Will is Will so he finds the little bits of it that are *slightly off* to be just so fucking charming. Shit. He's in love with the place. He looks across the kitchen to Hannibal.

Hannibal flat out comes to him. Directly. Like he'd been called.

"May we have a moment?" He doesn't say it at the realtor, but she leaves all the same. Hannibal touches his elbow when he gets there.

"It's. Hannibal?" Will sounds breathy.

Hannibal nods. "Perhaps we should wait to see what's downstairs."

"I *know* we should, okay? But if we leave this house we may have to steal the kitchen on the way out is all I'm saying," he laughs, still a little breathless, eyes following the light up to the exposed beams, slanting down.

Hannibal leans to see through the second doorway again. "And the dining room."

"And the master."
"And the garden."

"And the office. It's. It's kinda fucking perfect," he whispers.

Hannibal takes a deep breath and hooks Will's hand in the crook of his elbow to walk him into the dining room. Like he just needs to experience it with Will next to him. Will glances around the room, spotting a small hall, off to the side, leading to a doorway, and the welcoming, arched entrance to the dining room from the front. They reach the middle window and look out over a private winter wonderland. The yard wide and shaded with trees to one side, structured by the fence; squared off and leading to the greenhouse on the other side.

Will sees a flash- an image of Hannibal, forearms shining with sweat, speckled with black earth, bending to harvest carrots, trim dill, run a finger over the trumpeted curve of a bell-shaped flower.

Worse? He sees himself, chased for a ball around the towering trees, leading a panting troop of dogs through the back and down to the river. He knows it's out there, feels, in some primal way, how close he is to the deep woods and the water and a trail leading off somewhere toward the national forest, where deer run. Where fish clatter around rocks. Where he might bring Abigail. Where they might bring home rabbits and ducks and deer for supper.

"There's a..." Will hesitates. "There's that smaller bedroom with the corner windows. I almost wonder what Abigail would." He stops.

"What she would think of the space. How she might feel here," Hannibal fills in.

Will swallows and nods.

Hannibal's hand trails down to his and.
Takes it up. Holds it, palm-to-palm.

"I would need storage space in the basement. I still need to see it. An inspection would be wise for a property of this age."

"I know, I just!" He feels it. He can't not feel it. An excitement like being kicked, ass-first, into love. He wants to take off his shoes and hear the hush of his own socks in the bedroom. He wants to sit on the balcony, stare into the sky until he falls asleep, safe and cool.

Hannibal pulls him away from the window. At the opposite side of the dining room from the kitchen entrance, is the small hall. It's discreet and out of the way, though the windows continue here, lighting up a hidden butler's pantry and serving station, then the door. He tests the handle, flips on a light inside.

There are stairs.

"It's a fair distance from the kitchen." Not an impractical one, though Will really has no idea why it's relevant. Probably wine or... hanging sausages or something. Fancy food things for Hannibal.

They descend to the basement. Will finds another light switch at the bottom.

"I don't think you were ready to buy a house today. But of you might have to," Will laughs.

There's a wall of wine. It's not very filled, at the moment, but bottles dot a criss-crossed wooden structure with small slots, almost a natural cousin to the bookcases in the rooms directly above. Like they crashed into the floor and became something slightly different. A separate section has a rack for
larger bottles. Hooks for equipment, a shelf with a glass door for displaying crystal, a small cleaning station tucked away.

The basement keeps going. There's a room being used as a root cellar. Storage space. The laundry room and another space that's hooked up for light and plumbing, unfinished. A cellar door leads up top and outside but it's not very accessible.

Not too hard to make it accessible, either.

They come to the end and Will laughs again. "I'm finally disappointed. I can't believe there's not a heated, indoor swimming pool down here."

"I might have expected one as well."

"Adequate space?" Will asks.

"Perfect," Hannibal says, almost amazed.

"Hannibal," he says again. There's this weird feeling. There's this joy.

It feels lived-in already. Not haunted, but occupied and appreciated and adored. It feels right somehow. Will is a little confused by how right he feels with Hannibal tugging him around the basement by the hand.

"Will."

Will looks to him and he seems like he's waiting for something. So Will clears his throat and says, "Inspection. An inspection and. A check of the plumbing. Whether the electrical has been updated to code. Get them to come down on the price depending what needs fixing. I mean. The foundation looks solid down here. Doesn't feel damp. I don't see cracking. The trees," he shrugs, rambling, "make sure they're not gonna come down in a strong storm. And. See how far the property extends."

"And you," Hannibal lets his hand go to stand in front of him and take his shoulders. Thumbs at his neck for a moment. "Where do you see yourself in this home?"

He doesn't know how to answer that suddenly. Because, "It's not my home," but.

_With a mug of coffee, in front of that back kitchen window, watching the morning light rise through the glass of the greenhouse._

Only he sees Winston curled at his heel, too. And sees the others sniffing around the planters and barking at squirrels. And that's not possible.

_Abigail coming home from university for the summer. Pushing her curtains back and tucking hair behind her ears, looking out into the woods as she trades flats for boots. Stomps off to the river, reel in hand._

He can see that.

"You would be as welcome to me as anybody," Hannibal says.

"I just." Will shrugs. Lost.

Hannibal strokes his neck one more time. "I'd like to bring those points up with Ms. Holst. Shall we?" he steps aside and lets Will head back up before him.
Will is out in the yard for a while, kicking through the snow to the fence. Toeing it away from the edges of the garden. Eventually he makes it to the greenhouse and knows that he appreciates what's in there more than Hannibal will - flowers and cacti but no herbs. There's a young, potted lemon tree at least.

And upon coming back inside he hears the figure. Six point one million.

He's pretty sure he shouldn't have heard. He wipes his feet and tries to avoid the rugs getting back to the kitchen. Hannibal has pulled each cabinet open and left a couple of them that way. A few bowls have been left there, but not much else.

Holst steps away to make a call.

Will nods to Hannibal. "Going for it?"

"If some stipulations are met."

Will sighs. "This is pretty far from your practice."

"And closer to the great outdoors," Hannibal offers.

"Thinking of a career change?" Will grins, "I may have to write up a recommendation letter. I don't think anything out there will trust your paisley ties."

Hannibal moves to the sink and looks out the window. "I can easily move my practice."

Will comes to his side, shoves his hands in his pockets. "I'm sure there'd be plenty of work for you anywhere, really," he agrees.

"I see you here," Hannibal throws out. "I see you with the pack at your heels, leading Abigail to the river to teach her how to fish." He turns to Will and Will doesn't have the guts to look at him, already confused enough by what he's feeling. Already confusing what he's hearing with what he's absorbing from their emotional environment and with the things they haven't said since Budge's attack. The things he's thought he wanted and was pretty sure weren't actually on offer.

Fear dug deep that night, after the phone call. The empty eyes of dead friends turned from him, in his dreams. Turned north to new horizons and a fine pair of shoes walked away from him, not even impressing prints in the snow.

He thought Hannibal was moving away from the ghosts of Crawford and Alana. To a place where the Ripper doesn't stalk. Where serial killers don't get stabbed in his kitchen. Far away from Quantico. And from Will.

Will thought he was going to have to prepare to wave a friendly goodbye. Turn back to his little house. Stoke the fire and settle the dogs. Slowly work through his pantry. Tossing things as they expired because he didn't really know how to do what Hannibal does in the kitchen.

In his dreams, even as recently as last night, in a plush hotel, he heard Hannibal's carefree laugh as he tugged untied threads through their loops and left half of Will's belly open and falling to the floor. He felt Hannibal take himself away from him and, really? Thirty minutes ago it felt like it was about to happen. He wasn't prepared, but he has learned to prepare himself to be unprepared. Go home and fall apart and build new things after. To keep himself breathing. To keep his dogs alive and healthy. To go on and live for them.
And he can't tie the ends off, now. Because Hannibal is somehow seeing almost precisely what Will is.

He presses the point: "Do you see this?" Hannibal asks.

He wants to nod. But. "I can't see you dealing with the dogs. And I can't see living without them. They're noise and hair and demands and mess. But for me they're more... they're friends and I need them and they need me. They're activity and a reason to get out of bed, sometimes, when I don't even feel like feeding myself. I mean if you're offering to let me visit to-"

"I am offering for you to utilize the permit I just asked Ms. Holst to inquire about, to build a comfortable outside structure for your dogs. Will. It's true that I am not used to the noise and excitement of animals but yours are instructed to behave and they do, for the most part. You cannot think I'm ignorant of their positive impact on your life. If they were restricted to certain rooms on the main floor and the outsid-"

"Are you asking me to move in with you because it seriously sounds-"

"Yes."

They both face the window. Still. Hearing the softened words from Holst, talking on the phone in an empty room.

Mercifully, Hannibal doesn't look for his eyes before he goes on. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. I think if... you and I. Abigail. This place would." He's silent for a moment. "I wanted the opportunity to change our team into something closer. We work well as a team. Perhaps we can't share fully in one another's careers, but it was a relief for me to see your appointment on my ledger at the end of the day, even if you and I disagreed, for a time, about the impact of your career on your health. It was a relief to watch you take better opportunity to steer yourself to places in your mind which felt safer. It was humbling to be a part of that. And to be worth saving, myself."

He finally turns to Will even if Will won't return the eye contact.

"There also exists, I think, beyond offering a safe haven to the two people I value most, to share with Abigail our respect for her. Our appreciation and love for her. And my affection for you. What I feel for you doesn't have the bounds and borders I had assumed, Will." He motions to the window. The fences. "There's more property. It can be packaged together. The fences can stay or come down. Their limits can be expanded. This was a brief experiment. I had no expectation of finding anything in Boston or Maine. I found something here I didn't expect. And you. You are not what I ever expect. Would you allow me some time to try to fit into your life? To get used to the patterns and seasons? If you would allow me that room to grow, I would only ask the same of you. To work together. And grow together."

Will thinks he can feel his heart beating in his chest. His whole chest. His throat. Up through his shoulders. Knocking every rib. He looks up the window. Follows the height of the arch to the ceiling.

He doesn't want this the way he wanted to kiss Alana. He isn't grabbing for it. Isn't scrabbling to hold on to something.

It's being offered.

He felt calm out in the snowy yard. He feels close and warm and comfortable in this kitchen.

Will feels somehow equal to Hannibal. Like if he found flaws with the property, Hannibal would
more than take it into account - if Will objected, his view would be valued and this house would be off his wish-list, no matter how perfect it seems.

Almost as if Hannibal has been sketching the outline of this thing for Will to start recognizing the shape. Trying to illustrate for Will what they could be together if Will looked beyond what he'd cobbled together in the ruins of the FBI, to his other relationships. The ones that weren't built on piles of bodies.

Hannibal is his friend. He didn't care about the civilians Will worked to save. He decided that someone had to value Will because he wasn't doing it himself.

Hannibal is offering himself where Alana was only drifting close, and left when she saw the tides churning. Hannibal won't get bowled over. He will stand against the waves. He doesn't require stability of Will.

He is the stability.

Hell or high water.

"I didn't consider this?" Will admits and he knows he sounds confused. Maybe even shuddery and scared. It's just his heart flying, though. And he knows, now, how he deflects and the way it doesn't always switch on like that with Hannibal must mean something.

It would cheapen this. And Will doesn't know if he's ever recognized something this valuable within view. He has to hold his hand out now. He has to see if what's on offer will actually fall into his palm.

"If it isn't what you want," Hannibal says into the quiet, "it can take whatever shape you need until it is. You should find what you need with me. I want to be the place where you find reason. Where you find yourself."

Will pulls his hand from his pocket and looks down to take Hannibal's from his. To hold it.

"I don't know if you know how many adjustments you just signed up for. I don't know if you understand that I don't... really fit into your world as it stands."

Hannibal's look is actually withering. Dismissive. "I am expecting growth from the both of us. Not just your accommodation around my standard of living. We shouldn't be around one another. Beside one another - yes."

Tangled. Together and not just a team.

Someone is asking for this from him. Hannibal is asking for this from Will.

Will meets Hannibal's eyes because, for this, he should. He tightens his hand and nods. "I want to. Yeah. Yes."

Hannibal looks to the window again, uses his other hand to draw Will's up, to the crook of his arm again, and they turn together to wander after Ms. Holst.

Will can feel his heartbeat calming. Hannibal's hand rests atop his on his arm, holding it there.

It's incredible to feel the way this steadies him. His mind is gonna race after it, trying to piece together exactly how he got here. But this is a situation - the negotiating - Hannibal has to handle.
His money; his house.

Unless he calls it *their* house. Then things get stranger.

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They don't go to see the next property, or the next. They skip out on Holst's other bookings to set her to work on Hannibal's first offer. They wait until the owner calls Ms. Holst back. They didn't plan on staying in town, but the realty group offers them a hotel room in case negotiations are delayed. So they go. First, they stop at a specialty market to buy just enough groceries so Hannibal can, like, make a cheese-and-fruit platter and distract himself. Will can't get distracted. He just gets anxious, wondering if they made the right decision. Wondering if they shouldn't have gone to the other properties. Hoping no one else makes a more impressive bid.

Ms. Holst calls with the counter-offer and Hannibal rises to step out into the next room. He needs to negotiate the price back down a little more.

But he looks to Will again and sits back down. Sits with him and lets him hear the conversation instead of leaving. He takes notes throughout the call and, when he hangs up, reaches for Will's hand across the table. He looks anxious, which doesn't often happen. So Will readily reaches back and squeezes.

Strange how that, of all things, kind of cements his new status in Hannibal's life. Just the fact that he didn't choose to take that call privately. Just the fact that Will would have wanted to have a hand to hold in that moment and he was allowed to be there for Hannibal. He was allowed to do that.

They eat and open a bottle of white and don't finish it. The next call takes so long to be returned that they both get fidgety and take a cab back out to the property.

It wasn't a delusion. It really is that amazing when they see it again.

"We must fly back soon. Even if the outcome is uncertain." Hannibal wanders the main room. "I have appointments tomorrow. I will have to..." he shakes his head.

Sell the office space. Sell the house. Refer his patients away. Forward his mail. Get a moving company.

Will wouldn't-- *won't* have to do half that shit. He wants to keep the house in Wolf Trap. Expense isn't an issue, he owns the place outright. He could rent it out, maybe, if he cleaned it up.

He might... find a place to teach here? He might start reading cookbooks.

They end up back in the kitchen. The lights are out. The sun is still coming in.

Will stands at the counter he likes, overlooking the garden. "This would be a nice spot to make *shapely buns,*" he jokes.

Hannibal does that thing where he smiles, small and satisfied, that this is the common language they share, dorky as it is. "Will Graham," he seems to taste the name.

He moves as if to pass by Will, but slowly closes in and touches his elbows. His hands fall from there to Will's hips, turning him. He backs Will into his sunny spot at the counter and starts to press close.

Close. Until Will puts his hands on the edge to steel himself. And he doesn't lean back anymore as
Hannibal closes in.

Will just needs Hannibal to be the sure one. Needs Hannibal to be the one who kisses him so there's no doubt about who's asking, here.

Hannibal is the one to take his mouth. And Will ends up hanging on to his coat. His collar. His neck. His hair. Letting Hannibal kiss the sense out of him entirely. Some far off noise proves to be Hannibal's phone. Will has to blink away and parse that out, like, who knew other people still existed?

He moves to lean, press his nose against Will's head and answer the call.

The conversation is pretty much just "Accept it" which doesn't sound too smart - doesn't sound like a great negotiation tactic. But it gets Hannibal to hang up, put the phone down, and grab Will up close.

He pulls Will in to kiss again.

It's nice to be the kissee. He is definitely not the kisser right now and that's reassuring. Also...

Yeah, pretty hot.

Small touches to his back suddenly fucking flood him with feelings. Unstoppable and encompassing.

Hannibal, relieved that Will listened. Glad to be here with him. Happy that he's accepted this. Gentle with his body but firm about what he wants.

Hannibal's not seeing down-sides at the moment. He just bought a house and he's planting Will Graham in it and he'll... flower in front of this fucking window or something.

It's like Hannibal-

Will pulls away, breathless, to ask. He touches Hannibal's temples and down to his throat. "Do you-- are you--"

He drops his head and plants it in Will's neck. He inhales. "This is more than that," he says, kissing up Will's throat and stopping. Under his jaw. To kiss again. Again. Suck. Nip. Until Will is swaying into it.

Yeah. Maybe if you love your best friend, it's more than love. It's those two things combined and it's not as normal as you might see in movies. Maybe most the time it's healthy and the rest of the time you fuck each other up with the truth.

He wants to see if Hannibal will let him take this time.

When Will leans up to catch his mouth and clamps him close by the back of the head, Hannibal makes a noise that Will swallows, intrigued.

He lets Will get away with it for a while, until he's willing to allow the excitement to pull from his hand and float off like letting go of a balloon. He takes a breath. And lets Hannibal pin him to the counter and nip at his neck, up to his ear. Just settles into the feeling and lets these hands that he trusts, these hands that have cared for him already, form and move him.

Hannibal whispers: "How do you like our home, dear Will?"

Will shivers.
Suddenly realizes that soft, dark little nook in the master bedroom belongs to Hannibal, now.

Belongs to *them*.

A stranger's bed sits there and it will be removed and replaced with the wide, firm one Hannibal let him rest on after their last encounter with Gideon.

After the asshole changed that kitchen and sullied the place.

After the local, state police and FBI paraded through.

After Hannibal gathered Will close, for doing right by him and fighting with him to end Abel Gideon, and spoke reverently into his skin.

Will turns up to look at Hannibal's throat, half-expecting a wound there. Like how Hobbs pulled his knife across Abigail's neck and, even if Will helped her stay alive, he didn't really *save her*.

But there's no harm done to Hannibal. He's powerful and alive and Will may have made mistakes but they haven't managed to hurt Hannibal. He is giving Will refuge. A safe harbor. Tending the lamps with him.

"It's beautiful," Will whispers and nods, lets himself touch Hannibal's strong jaw and neck and slide down his tie. "Not sure I deserve credit for like *a whole house-worth* of 'more than that'."

"Would you believe me a romantic?" Hannibal smiles. "I must admit I think that I am."

"Mm." Will tilts his head, breathes in the light scent of him, probably more of his kitchen clinging to his clothes, herbs and citrus, char and earth, than any mixed or concocted aftershave. "I kinda see it. But that's not what the wine and dessert and flowers have always been."

"No. Those are for public consumption. Rarely am I allowed to have you at my table, with others to see. It's thrilling when you let me have you there. But I see the appeal of consuming you in private," he goes on in what... sounds like Italian. As he's doing it, though, he pushes his hands down Will's waist to his hips to his thighs and suddenly hooks behind his knees and pulls him up to the counter.

Will gasps a laugh and Hannibal moves snugly between his thighs as he recites. A poem? Maybe? And Will gets it.

Hannibal thinks his romancing is done in private. He thinks he's very discreet. Well.

He stands close to Will all the time and at the first opportunity to introduce Will as his *partner* to strangers, he's done so. He's sought a deeper connection to Will since they were both left alive with Abigail. As murky as those waters are, he thinks of them as de-facto parents to her. And since Will has come down from the fever, Hannibal has been as careful as he can be about pleading his case to Will. Parading him through houses and driving him everywhere and (he's pretty sure) trying to convince Abigail that Will's an okay guy.

What Hannibal's saying is that he isn't in love with Will. It's more than that. And he's been *very good* and as low-key as he can endure. So he wants Will to say it. He wants to know that this can start to happen *out loud*.

He wants to *hear it*.

And Will has no idea what to say.

Hannibal rambles into his skin, his collar, up to his ear. He'll talk and he'll stand, hot and heavy and
wide, between Will's thighs. And he'll stay close. Wanting to kiss and to keep going. But he won't unless Will gives him some of his romance in return. He wants things deep and equal and Will isn't sure they are. "None of this... felt like it was on the table." He puts four fingers over Hannibal's mouth and waits, sure he's going to remain silent and listen.

He nods.

"I don't even know why it is on the table?" Will admits. Then he takes a breath and allows himself to parse it aloud because Hannibal is waiting. "Well. Other than the tension. Which I didn't read for sexual tension maybe because one of the first things I did was traumatize you-"

Hannibal shakes his head and his eyes go narrow.

"Well. I killed somebody in front of you and there was a girl dying on the floor and I was useless about that but you made sure she survived. And I kind of assume everyone still wants to be read as straight when you first get to know them so. Yeah. Didn't think of this as an option," he shrugs.

Hannibal presses into Will's hand until he drops it to his shoulder. "And now?"

"... I like you. I trust you. I know I can trust you. You care for me. You've helped me be healthy. You've... lectured sense into me and shown me my options." He is drawn to Hannibal's mouth. Tries to pull him in for another kiss, but he won't give Will anything but his forehead. Quite frankly, the pleasant warmth of him against Will makes him want to say whatever will get him laid the fastest.

But what Hannibal wants here is for Will to stop being avoidant and trust him with a fragile part of himself. He avoids a lot. He snipes at people while his own back is turned on them. He even quit his job by filing paperwork from home. And he wouldn't look at all the possibilities when he was ill. He's still sure it wasn't 100% a physical illness and that he isn't addressing that enough.

He just kind of assumes Hannibal will be here to kick his ass into gear eventually.

I need you is not the right answer, though. That's not romantic and it's... too needy. That's the answer unstable-Will might have thrown at Alana in a last-ditch effort.

And anything else feels like I'm assuming your cooperation with my further health and well-being.

If he looks Hannibal in the eye and admits he wants to be touched, held, maybe even doted on, definitely kissed, probably made love to, hopefully cared for, and above all, not left alone-

He kisses Hannibal's head. 'Cause he could definitely pull all those off to give to Hannibal. Love is just having the balls to ask for it in return.

"Hearts-and-flowers. Head-over-heels in love with you."

Hannibal gives him an appropriately funny look. So okay.

He cards Hannibal's hair perfectly back into place from his grabbing. "You're my teammate. My best friend. Now? It's definitely more than that," he agrees quietly.

There's a word he will have to find for himself. One that's better than love. Because Hannibal's next kiss tastes like devotion - he has always clearly defined things for Will. That's definitely what it is.

For a while, kissing with the sun fading on his back from the great, towering kitchen window, he thinks he is somehow going to tempt Hannibal into grinding against him. He hooks his legs around him and goes after him with enthusiasm, but he's romantic so maybe it takes like a ton of foreplay.
Or a few weeks of dinners and dancing.

"I have to sign paperwork," he eventually sighs, pulling way.

Plus he probably has rules about nudity in the kitchen.
Plus a stranger's stuff still sits all around them.
Plus there's a flight to catch back to Baltimore.

As soon as Hannibal pulls away, Will's chest tightens and he wants to go home. So he gets down from the counter and lets Hannibal kiss his hand and pull it over his arm and that feels better.

Home is the word. Harbor might work, but home is a little more accurate.

Hannibal is devoted and Will has a home.

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When Ms. Holst's intern swings back into the conference room, she takes the papers, inspects the papers, nods at the papers, puts the papers back in a folder, and hands Hannibal his copies.
"Congratulations. You've just purchased your new property," she smiles and extends her hand and they shake. "Mr. Graham," her smile is a little more fake with him, her handshake a little more brief. But that's fine. This is Hannibal's moment. His investment.

He gets a key and he'll get the other copies of it after they've moved the last of the staging furniture and leftover items out. There's moving to be arranged on his part, too. "And please keep in contact with our group if we can do anything else for you," she says.

"Would you let Mr. Mesidor know I'll need to speak with him at his earliest convenience regarding two of my properties in Baltimore?"

"Of course. Now there's champagne, if you partake?" she nods to the intern.

"We would, but we need to return this evening. Is your car available?" he stands, buttoning his jacket back up.

"Allow me to show you out," Holst smiles.

Hannibal snags Will's coat before he can and helps him into it, and, after he dons his own, leads Will out with a hand low to his back. Close and possessive. Kind of comforting.

The driver already has their couple small bags and, though he clearly doesn't need to, Hannibal tips generously.

Or maybe he does need to, if they end up making a spectacle of themselves. Because Will sits beside him in the back of the SUV and smiles some. He's hunched, warming his hands between his knees, but he really is happy they completed this little mission together. "Congratulations."

"I appreciate the help," he reaches out in a way that looks like he's asking for Will's hand. He's freezing, but he gives it. Hannibal looks a little impatient. He unbucksles and comes close and takes Will's other hand, too. He warms them in his own and blows heat onto them.

There's like a seriously cliché heart-flutter going on behind Will's ribs.

"I think I will do this often. If I am allowed. Surprise you with touch. You look amazed that it's happening every time. It makes you seem such a small, innocent creature."

Hannibal smiles and kisses his hands. Keeps warming them. He looks serious after another moment. "Our team. The connection we've come to and decided on?"

"Yeah?" he feels a different kind of flutter. A worried one for some reason.

"I have no wish of delaying the beginning of things." He presses Will's fingers to his lips again and keeps them there, his eyes sliding shut for a long moment. "A part of it is enthusiasm for the prospect. Another is a hope of giving you no reason to change your mind."

Will tugs on his hands a little so he opens his eyes. Will glances to the driver, who's paying them no mind. "I'm not gonna run away. This is... kind of an amazing place. Never thought I'd end up here."

And he doesn't mean Maine. He pulls the back of Hannibal's hand to his own mouth because, if this is romance and Hannibal wants romance, this isn't overt or outrageous and he can do it. Then he has their warm fingers by his nose. And he realizes- "My nose is freezing. You gonna kiss my nose, too?"

Hannibal grins and leans in and nips at the end of his nose, kisses the bridge. Draws Will closer so he can bury his face in Hannibal's warm coat.

This is so fucking strange. It's also not at all as strange as he thinks it ought to feel.

If Jack could see him now.

Ungenerous thought, but. He's kind of got a functioning relationship. And a home. And he feels like this all means he might even slowly reclaim his own mind. Reclaim it from the garden of horrors Jack was nurturing.

Hannibal speaks close to his ear, tone low. "My point, Will, is that I don't wish to delay a move to Maine. However, since we sat down to sign the paperwork, I've been thinking about Gideon."

The rattle that rolls through Will is involuntary. He just didn't expect to have the ordeal thrown at him in this moment. Hannibal runs a hand over his side like he thinks he's shivering from cold.

He wishes Hannibal had no reason to think of Gideon. They haven't talked about it nearly enough, but Hannibal, who left one promising career behind because of a patient's death, had to help Will end a man's life. He has no idea if, between that and Budge, he's been sleeping okay or getting enough help from his own psychiatrist. Will talks out everything with Hannibal. He doesn't know if he's been too messed up about it to return the favor or if he's just been trying not to burden Will with it.

Until now.

"What about?"

"I would like a few days, after the house is clear and everything has been installed, to have a security company make some adjustments."

"That's a great idea," he's quick to agree. Whatever makes Hannibal feel safe between their history of violence and the nutcase he's about to share space with.

Will doesn't want to know the particulars, either. Because, if he means that he also has to have something on hand to help him if Will ever loses control, that would be fair.

"That's a really good idea," he repeats. "I mean, I don't expect to be there on day one."
"I knew it," Hannibal sighs. "You're going to make me unpack boxes all on my own," he pretends to lament.

"I mean, hey. You expect me to unload all your fragile glassware and your giant armoires and shit, you're gonna have to pay me in the currency of the realm. The reward for helping people move is always beer and often pizza and sometimes sex."

"That can be arranged," he says, and pulls Will's head back up to kiss him.

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Will sleeps on the flight and wakes up to-- flashes?

It's the runway lights flashing through the windows as they land. He shakes the cobwebs clear as the tires hit tarmac.

He must have been clenching his jaw. He's a little stiff and there's a headache building.

The flashes... weren't just the landing. He dreamed of strobes. Dreamed of choking. Dreamed of his knees slipping in Gideon's blood and him laughing, looking up, knives planted in him but telling Will, \textit{the sound of my voice brings you deeper and deeper, calm, a pleasant room}.

"God," he grunts and sighs. Rubs at his temples.

Hannibal is closing his tablet and slipping it back into his bag.

He isn't gonna tell Hannibal about that. He steers well clear of anything involving Gideon. If Hannibal were ready for Will to climb into his head, he'd say so. But until Hannibal cops to any disturbance in his sleep or tortured memories, Will doesn't want to pester him and bring it to the front. It's possible that, by some chance, Hannibal isn't plagued by Budge and Gideon in his sleep. He's got dead former patients, too. And Franklin. And family, from what little Will has been able to piece together. Maybe he has a better handle on his pile of bodies.

Hannibal is in \textit{real} therapy, after all. And a member of the profession.

Yeah. This mess is probably just exclusive to people like Will who don't deal with it in a functional manner.

Gets him thinking, though. Gets him wondering - hoping, really - about Hannibal opening up to him. Now. With... this thing. This \textit{relationship}.

He can't fuck this up. He has to be involved. He can't be leaning on Hannibal 90% of the time. You contribute in a relationship if you want it to last. There has to be reciprocity. He needs to earn this.

As the plane taxis to the private hangar it originated from, the woman on staff comes back to see that they have everything they need, asks if they'll need assistance with their bags.

Hannibal thanks her and eventually leads Will off the plane and to the Bentley, waiting under cover for the past couple days.

Will is still yawning as they drive away from the airfield.

"I know you're ready to be back home and at peace," Hannibal starts.

"Back at the house," Will corrects before he thinks better of it.
That throws Hannibal into a silence for two stoplights. "Your house," he agrees. "Would you like to head back to Wolf Trap or can I have my celebratory dinner?"

Will smiles. "I mean, of course you can."

"But, with you?"

"Well, yeah." He doesn't know why he sounds so out of sorts. He yawns again and his jaw pops and that feels better even though it sounds awful. "Geeze. The altitude really messed with me? Sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for. Will, I can take you back to your house. It's been a busy two days. I can better arrange a meal for us another day," he offers.

With the headache receding all at once, something suddenly... kinda chimes in, in his head.

Celebratory meal might also equal celebratory sex.

Unless Hannibal is a healthier person than that and he doesn't fuck on the first date. Both of which are entirely possible, date status notwithstanding.

"Um," he's been away from the dogs for longer stretches than this. And he isn't exactly looking forward to Wolf Trap considering it's sort of synonymous, now, with being without Hannibal which is a lot different than it used to be just being alone.

He may be groggy but he also doesn't want to have to follow the threads of that dream and he will, if Hannibal gets him back to Wolf Trap in good time and he just crashes out.

Could stay up for a while, cook and drink and make plans.

Make plans. Holy shit.

Moving isn't fun. He knows that.

So why is the prospect of making plans kinda fucking thrilling?

"Let's, um. Let's go to your place. I'm sure you still have something extravagant to make, even on short notice."

"You know me well," he nods. Which makes it a little frustrating that Will was literally just thinking about how that isn't entirely true.

He doesn't know his partner very well at all. And Will doesn't want to poke around where he doesn't belong, at the start of this thing. He's got better self-preservation skills than that. If he gets too intrusive, too fast, and picks up too much of Hannibal's internal workings, he could be run off quick. Will can't stand the thought of Hannibal trying to distance him because he's got too many questions and is too emotionally absorbent. They both still need private spaces.

Eventually they'll talk. Couples do, and, again: Hannibal is a Healthy Person. That kind of makes this a Healthy Relationship.

Will laughs.

At least half-healthy.

"Something funny?" Hannibal asks, seeming somewhat cocooned in the dark of the car's interior.
"I... well, just. I think I'm in a healthy relationship?" he breathes another short laugh.

"Mm. That's not funny," he disagrees. "It's not remarkable, either. It's what we've earned with each other. It's something you deserve. Please understand that this isn't a product of circumstances set up by your time in the FBI, Will. I asked for help from you, and you provided it. You asked for help from me, and I provided it. As best I could, at the time. We aren't dependent upon life-and-death scenarios for trust in each other. We are entitled to be... average. And enamored. And learn from one another. Grow from experiences."

Will had no idea it was important for him to hear that, but it is.

This isn't unstable. After he's fully recovered, Hannibal won't stop caring. He'll keep on caring when Will is boring and back to teaching classes. Hopefully at some... state college or something. A nice, tame adjunct position or something part-time.

Likewise, after the house hunt, Will doesn't feel any less like he wants to be somebody Hannibal relies upon. He will love Hannibal when there are just tough days at work and when the cooking isn't fine dining.

His heart chokes him for a moment.

Holy shit.
He's allowed to be in average, everyday love with Hannibal.

That's why, when he's invited to bed and falls asleep with just one possessive hand on his center, no sex and no deep, dangerous dreams, it means more to him than he ever thought possible.

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Hannibal doesn't leave him alone in bed.
He waits.

He smiles when Will wakes up and pushes his slightly-damp hair away from his ears with a really subtly sympathetic look. He doesn't make a big deal of it. He just looks a little pained at what Will has to deal with.

But, listen. A few years of this? He could easily find other things to fill his mind with than serial murders and bile-inducing crime scenes. Hannibal is full of smart stuff. New stuff. Interesting stuff.

And nice, boring stuff.

God, he can't wait to have a boring boyfriend. What the hell even is that?

"I have a confession to make," his voice quiet and concerned in the dim morning. "I entertained the idea of looking for properties in those two states as an alternative therapy for you."

Wow. He really does want Will to get stoned and stop dreaming. Incredible. "Guess I better pick that cannabis cookbook back up."

He nods, solemn, with eyes hooded. He dips to kiss Will and Will lets the power of it pull him from the sheets. He hangs on to Hannibal's shoulders even when he's released the lip he snagged in a dragging bite.

"I'd like to make you coffee. And feed you fruit. And undress you. Shower with you." He moves to kiss down Will's neck.
"I'm there. I'm totally there."

A noise. Like a-

"Is that your doorbell?"

"It is. I would rather be rude to them than rude to you, however." He's pulling Will's hand down to kiss his palm, nip at his wrist. Why is that hotter than the other places his mouth has been?

The doorbell doesn't quit.

Will curses, a slur to it, lazily turned on and very aware that Hannibal has come to kneel between his legs.

Shit. It literally does. not. stop. ringing.

Hannibal sighs and nuzzles under his chin. Will pets his hair down and resigns himself to pulling the sheets back up his waist.

"I'll be downstairs. Take your time, dear Will," he lingers to kiss him again and Will nearly whines at losing him.

Hannibal rises, snags a robe, and leaves, feet silent.

Will drums his fingers on the bed. Worst fucking timing. Probably Mesidor's realty company looking for more signatures or something. Christ.

He has a minute to lie there and replay the memory of Hannibal's mouth on his. His heart swoops and he closes his eyes to feel more, feel it again.

But he's expected downstairs. He should stop. He should calm down.

Faint but determined voices. Will takes deep breaths and calms himself as it seems they refuse to disappear.

He's gonna have to explain to his too-polite Doctor that it's fine not to invite everybody in, isn't he?

But he's nearly ready to leave bed when Hannibal pushes the door back open all the way and comes in. He offers his hand to Will and drags him up, out of the sheets. He kisses Will's head and rubs his back. "I'm sorry about this. I have a robe you can borrow. There are two agents downstairs."

He doesn't let Will move out of his arms quite yet.

"I despise their very presence. I'm sorry," he repeats.

But Will understands. Hannibal has campaigned for Will to be totally done with the FBI. He wants no more of them. He doesn't want them in his house and he doesn't want them in Will's life.

"They want your credentials returned, I'm sure. And your firearm. I'll retrieve them." He kisses Will one more time.

Kisses like he's worried they'll ask him to keep the ID and he'll say 'yes'.

He tangles his fingers in Hannibal's shirt and takes another kiss from him. His first try at a silent conversation. One of those couple things. When he pulls away he looks to see if Hannibal understands what he meant.
He relaxes just a little. 
He gets it.

Will won't say 'yes' except to this.

Hannibal nods but is still reluctant, retrieving the gun and badge from the guest room. The one Will stayed in, before.

Should have figured. It makes Will smile, a little chagrined that he could have taken Gideon out easier if he just remembered: Hannibal trusts him.

Will doesn't know the agents. They're from Oversight. They log his ID in, standing right there in the front entryway. They check the serial number on his gun and log in the amount of ammo. He has to sign and finally gets to confirm his address for his last check. Then they hand him a notice.

"I already gave statements to Baltimore PD and the BSU team after Gideon," he shrugs, handing it to Hannibal after he's read it.

"Is this disciplinary in nature?" Hannibal asks, skimming it.

"Mr. Graham, Abel Gideon's death was the result of an unconventional use of deadly force. You understand, there has to be a review-"

"I understand that Abel Gideon killed Alana Bloom and stood in my kitchen, telling me he took credit for Jack Crawford's death as well," Hannibal snaps. "Will's firearm was not in his possession during his recovery from a prolonged illness and yet he still took great risks to save my life. I only assisted, in essence, after the fact. And his own former team conducted the evidence review."

"We understand," the taller guy steps in, "that Mr. Graham wasn't on the clock when it happened. There's-"

"Do you understand-" Hannibal starts to fire back, but Will puts a hand to his arm and he stops, looks down to him. He's straightened his spine in the challenge. He looks like he's a full foot taller.

"Questioning and you close out the case? That's all? And I'm done with Quantico? My paperwork was good the last time I checked."

"Your paperwork is good," the second agent confirms. "This is definitely just procedural."

Yeah. Right. Okay. "Fine, whatever. But remember I'm off the clock, so I'm leaving this meeting as soon as I'm damn well done with it. Have a nice day." He nods to the door.

The first guy hesitates. The second one nods and turns to leave. So they just go. Hannibal moves to close and lock the door behind them.

He drops the letter on a table, then turns back to Will. Turns back to the letter. Spreads it out with one wide hand. Reads it again.

"I'm so ready to be done," Will's own voice surprises him. The strain of it, the stress he hasn't heard from himself, really, since he woke up in the dining room, in a fever, the night Alana and Jack died.

He feels suddenly slumped. Like, when watching Hannibal get righteously angry and click his spine straight, Will is the one who shrunk, defeated.

He'll have to walk those halls, acknowledging that he's leaving them one final time. Leaving agents
and civilians to die at the mercy of who knows how many cruel, heartless men. He's stepping away and he will have to face those facts in the light of day. Union reps and paperwork couldn't save him from that.

His teammate, his partner, steps up quietly and pulls him in, cradles his head. "I want you to know something," he says. "I wish for you to understand that I don't fear my memories of Tobias Budge, because he was not the end of you. I do not fear my memory of," he blinks his eyes closed for a moment, breathes, "the feeling of Abel Gideon under that knife, expiring. Because you appeared in my kitchen and brought him down. And I only wanted you not to have to do it by yourself. I am not afraid of these things. I am proud of us. Our team. We will fly from the FBI and I will cherish my bright boy and we shall live a life they cannot touch."

Will lets his eyes close. Hannibal kisses over them.

"You cannot always be so weary. I forbid it." His kiss is a smile on Will's lips this time. "Come to breakfast."

"If you really love me, you'll feed me and fuck me," Will touches his arms and down his front. Opens his eyes.

"I can prove that I do much more than that," Hannibal nods, like as you wish.

So coffee first, then light, fluffy, buttery eggs. Minted fruit with cream. And back upstairs.

Hannibal rids him of his clothes in simple sweeps. Eases him to the bed and makes him sit.

He is distracted by the scars Will has. Tuts over his old shoulder injury. He folds his own robe over a chair and pulls Will to stand again. Draws him to the bathroom. It's smaller and warmer than he thought it would be. Hannibal reaches to start the water and warm the stall and Will steps in front of him, pushes at his shirt until he kisses Will and takes it off.

Hannibal is scarred to hell.

Most of the injuries were well taken care of. The scars are only shiny dashes across his body. The vast majority appear quite old.

If...

Hannibal hasn't talked about his past much. And... hell. This might be why.

If he was abused and he came out the other side as such a giving, wonderful person.... holy shit.

Hannibal catches his wandering hands up. Kisses them and stares at Will's naked body. He reaches down to cradle his cock in one hand. Will breathes, calming himself, growing hard but trying to keep it slow and make the most of this.

Hannibal uses his other hand to turn Will's head back up with some force. He plunders his next kiss from him.

It's rough and Will likes that. Loses control of his deep breaths. Hannibal lets go suddenly and Will blinks to see him stepping out of the rest of his clothes. He gets Will into the shower stall. He feels only one hit of warm water before Hannibal has flipped him to press his front against the wall. He kisses down Will's neck and moves the shower head to spray, warm, down on them. He pulls his hands down Will's back slowly, easing his tension and settling his body against him. He reaches back up to tousle Will's hair and get it soaked. Keeps kissing, shoulder, shoulder, neck, cheek, ear.
"May I take what I want from you or do you need time to process and decide?"

Jesus. No wonder Hannibal wants to be boring boyfriends. He's a freak in the sheets. His flag only flies in the bedroom.

"Take it," he nods.

"If you need me to stop, tell me."

"Okay," he pants.

"Or hit me. Either is fine." This declaration is followed by the most confusing, the absolute gentlest touch to his hips anyone has ever given Will.

That would sound abusive from anyone else. Scary, even. But he is actually a thousand percent sure that, if anyone knows how to do rough play safely, it's this man. So. Will nods. "Got it."

"Promise me."

"I promise?"

"Good," he praises, curving his hands down Will's groin and reaching to touch him, one hand diving to take hold of his balls and the other jerking him long and slow, knuckles clacking against the tiles each time he reaches the tip.

"Um-" he's about to warn him against going so fast, so soon, but then he presses closer and Will feels him hard against his ass. And just... moans.

"Good, my Will." Hannibal releases him to hold his thighs and helps him carefully spread his feet wider on the slick floor. He moves away so the water pelts Will in the back, warm and relaxing. Will doesn't know what he's doing until he feels breath on his ass. Hannibal dropped to his knees with the soap and-- god. He kisses there, up and down as far as his thighs. Cleans him in an embarrassingly thorough way until-

"You said, before, that you didn't mind me looking at your charts, your bloodwork. I know you're quite safe. I wouldn't have you any other way. Would you like to see my latest blood panel or would you like me to use a condom? I can do either one or both. Unless you'll simply trust me to enter you bare. Trust that I would take care of you."

He clenches involuntarily as Hannibal's fingers go from careful and clinical to testing. Will gasps.

He really had no idea what he'd be getting in sex with Hannibal. But, uh, so far so good. And if he can't trust Hannibal, what is he even doing here? "Really just want whatever you want." It comes out just this side of pleading.

"All you have to do is...?" he leads.

"Um. Ask. And you'll stop. Or."

"Hit me, if I don't get off you fast enough. I can take it. I'd rather you feel empowered than I make a mistake." He punctuates these instructions with a bite to Will's ass. A small bite of one swell, near the side. He sinks his teeth in harder. Harder.

"O-okay," he slams a hand on the wall, gasping.

He's seriously fucking relieved that Hannibal gets the message. That this isn't some precision
safeword shit, because he doesn't actually know if he can hit Hannibal.

As long as he gets the cues, they're in business.

Hannibal uses the soap on him one more time, two fingers slipping in by now. Then he starts washing Will's whole body. He rises as he works and Will tries to get a grip but he's so sure. Every stroke over Will's skin is confident and gentle. So fucking reassuring.

"I believe you're going to enjoy this," Hannibal kisses words into his skin, following his spine. "And I have my permission. But you must tell me one thing you need. You must let me give you something you've been waiting for."

He just... wants to get railed, to be honest. He wants his mind to go pleasure-blank and to be held close. When Hannibal turns him and takes him in his arms, he still doesn't have an answer. He palms Will's face to turn him up again, for his mouth.

Will gets a good, long look at his good, long cock when Hannibal shifts back for a moment to soap himself up, rinse off.

Will takes the soap from him to set aside and grabs him by the neck.

He grins. Goes willingly. He likes that.

Deep breath. "Want you to fuck me until I'm shaking too hard. I think I can handle that."

"And then?" He reaches to shut off the water and they're left in the dripping quiet.

"What?"

"What should I do after? Leave you alone?"

"No. Um."

"Care for you?"

Will shivers. He's never been in a relationship where he could just ask for that. He doesn't want Hannibal to press him to say it aloud.

He gives Will a look.

Well, he can always hit him if he doesn't do it right. He really has always understood Will's limits, even when he pushed them himself.

He genuinely doesn't require more from Will - he gets it, so he just helps him out of the shower, brings him to the bed, and plants him head-down on it. He adjusts Will's knees and placement to what he needs.

He pushes Will's head back down when he tries to help.

And then he keeps hold of Will's calves while he licks him open.

Shivers from it. Rocking up his spine and making him reach back with one hand.

But when he reaches, Hannibal stops.

"Down, please." He pushes Will's arms back into place, holding himself in a crouch, ass up on the
end of the bed.

He gets that he has to keep his own balance so Hannibal can concentrate. Okay.

He's opened, slow and wet and thorough. Then, after a while, Hannibal pants against his ass and moves to find lube. He keeps working, wetter and wetter, obscene noises and Will's mouth open and crying out, saliva and shouts in the sheets.

There's no warning other than a breath of room-temperature air before Hannibal switches his fingers out for his cock. He holds Will's hips and goes hard. Moves to hold him by the legs and it's a little wilder.

Squelching and obscene. But wet and sliding and easy for it.

He balls up a fist and hits the sheets after Hannibal's been going so non-stop for so long that his oxygen gets caught in his chest.

Hannibal stops. Pulls out. Warm and slick just resting his hips against Will. He lets Will lean up for a moment and breathe. Pulls him to sit up, kisses his back and wraps a hand around him to jerk him again.

Well that's too... easy. Too safe and sweet. So he dumps himself forward again, presents his ass for another round. Hannibal keeps jerking him this time, fucking him hard from behind.

Wails into the sheets. Gasps for air again.

The second time, Hannibal is the one who knows he needs to breathe.

He pulls Will up, kissing his back. "Deep breaths, my good, good Will." He strokes some but he also pets Will's belly.

It's starting to seem like he could just fuck for ages. That's probably what happens when you take care of yourself and eat right and don't let your mind and body fracture on a regular basis.

"I can't hang on," Will pants.

"Let me fix it," he pushes Will forward some and lets him move up the bed. Climbs on behind him and takes him slow and steady this time, both of them fixed in place and not sliding off the end of the bed.

It's not like before, with his body juddering with the force of repeated thrusting, but suddenly it's solid and sure, way more likely to finish him off. He pushes his own head into the sheets, now, to try to focus. But he tastes Hannibal on the air and one hand comes to his cock again, teasing at the base while the other comes to the side of his ass and Hannibal presses a thumb into that bite he gave earlier.

Not words but still a statement.

A statement that he'll keep going as long as it takes. A reminder of where he is, how he got here, who he can trust.

Oh, god, when Will's worn and sore, Hannibal will sit him at the table and feed him as much as his stomach can handle. He'll kill Will's nightmares by rolling him over in the night and slipping inside and kissing his shoulders. The next time horror comes knocking, he'll stand beside Will, scarred and armed just like him. No one would stand a chance against them.
The thumb massages into his ass and presses that button, that bite, again. He comes, back bowing, eyes rolling. Hannibal's unfettered praise in his ears.

He wants what he said. For Hannibal to keep going until his own arms are too shuddery to hold him up. Until he's so sensitive he could cry from the lightest touch.

True to his word, Hannibal just gives it to him.

When Will's arms actually collapse under him, Hannibal pulls out and curls Will on his side. He nestles Will in the sheets and kisses down his arm. Hannibal's still hard, himself, and strokes himself off with a vein-strained iron grip. Hard. And still slick from Will's ass. He comes across Will's hip, a warm spatter on his skin, pressing the head of his cock against Will until he begins softening.

At that, Hannibal moves to wipe them up and busies himself with soothing hands over Will, limb by limb, until he no longer twitches from it, just goes pliant and liquid.

"You are beautiful this way. Exactly as I wanted you."

Oh fuck. "Really?"

In response, he presses that bite mark again. Then soothes his thumb around it. Will feels how his ass tenses and releases. He was almost vibrating too constantly to feel it before. He instantly wants to do that for Hannibal again. Rolls his head back to loll against him.

Will gets the feeling that if he fights this praise, he'll only make his partner sad, unhappy.

He kisses Will's forehead and speaks in... maybe Latin? Probably. "It would please me," he switches to English after another ramble, "for you to stay and rest. But I am conflicted by the compulsion to take you back to Wolf Trap and help you pack."

"We can't even move in yet," he yawns.

He has no response to this. He strokes Will's skin.

He doesn't want to be reasonable. He doesn't want to wait. He doesn't want Will to go to Quantico for his questioning.

Will gathers his hand to tangle their fingers. Hannibal spoons himself close. Breathes Will in.

"I am loathe to separate from you, though we have so much to do individually. I wonder if I can draw you back into bliss, in Maine, after we are tired of moving and frustrated with setbacks. Those things are normal and inevitable. But you are not normal and inevitable. I had not thought of you as intended for me." He tightens their hands. "Now, however, I would not let you leave my side until we are home, if I had my way."

No. They'll be okay. They'll take refuge in their bland little left-of-normality after all this is over. Will can work to make this feel natural, even if it was unexpected for both of them.

Hannibal will make friends with dogs.

Will will... probably spend his days outside, on the property, working and fishing and waiting for his lover to return. Get used to being a kept man if he doesn't find a nice, safe professorship in town.

That's not what he ever expected.

Not what was intended. Not normal and inevitable.
But it will work.

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They do have to split up. Spend time in their own homes. There's a lot to be taken care of.

But two days later, Hannibal arrives on his doorstep with wandering hands and breathy praise for how much he's packed and thrown out and cleaned up, pleased with his progress – pleased that they're this much closer to Maine, to home. Seemingly desperate with the feeling.

He has to drive Will to the hearing, but they immediately start off running late. Out on the porch, with the dogs shut in and noisy behind him, Will sits and lets Hannibal lean over him, sucking him off too good, too fast. He holds Hannibal's head and babbles nonsense. Will's numbed by the cold until pleasure gets his veins pumping hot, warming him up.

Hannibal pulls off, mouth wet and used, and Will is practically winded by the sight. "Let me take you home after this." He means home. Their new home.

Jesus, he just wants to say yes. "Moving company. The... new cabinets. The dogs." There are a hundred-hundred things to do.

Wordlessly, Hannibal bottles his disappointment and pulls Will's hands to the back of his head. He sets them in his hair and settles his mouth back down on Will's prick. His lips slowly descend, then Will feels his throat flex around the end of his cock.

He doesn't move until Will pants a moan and clamps Hannibal's head down on himself just a little. That triggers Hannibal's moan. Makes him rumble around Will's cock.

Doesn't last much longer than that.

Hannibal wants Will to use him. Wants Will to make use of him and ask for things.

He wants Will to want him.

His silence, on the drive to Quantico, betrays to Will how stressed he is. And it's not just the move, referring his clients, and dealing with the FBI. It's something to do with Will.

They feel perfect together.

They do. It was so unexpected.

A second time, that same day, Hannibal had fucked him so well before bed that he slept that second night like he was drugged. Blissful and dreamless, knowing he was adored and protected.

Will left work unfinished at Quantico.

But he's learning that profiling - plus that thing he does, the way he feels it out - that's not the only thing he's useful for.

He does something for Hannibal. Something that drives him wild and makes him want to slowly creep out of that perfect shell he's built around himself.

He thinks back to that first breakfast. In Minnesota.

You know, he wonders if Hannibal has been pursuing him. Or, rather, how long he has.
There's a guard station before the main Marine campus at Quantico. They have to slow down, five cars deep. Will gets his license out of his wallet and hands it to Hannibal to show to the guard.

It doesn't feel like he can kiss Hannibal once they get past the gate. Like it's not right. Like Quantico is a part of who they used to be and not who they are.

That's bullshit.

What they used to be lead to this. It's the foundation of this. Maybe it's full circle - he has to come back to Quantico to be released from it.

"Hannibal," he calls softly. After pulling up one car length, he turns. Will looks him in the eye. He doesn't avoid it. He can read Hannibal and knows he wishes to be read. "I will go home after this. I'll come right to you. Wait for me and I'll come right back to you. Okay?"

He thumbs at a crease in his sleeve. Moves up another car length. "I know." But he doesn't say anything more.

So Will feels how unsettled he is and believes he can do nothing about it.

Once he's got his temporary ID, the clerk at the front desk calls up to the agents who will escort Will to the meeting. He pushes Hannibal by the elbow to a chair and hands over his jacket for him to keep. Hannibal digs in the pockets and hands over Will's glasses. He would have forgotten those.

Will looks up. "Thank you," he tugs on Hannibal's lapel.

Hannibal takes the glasses back. Leans down to kiss his lips and then puts the glasses on his face, himself.

He looks the perfect picture of poise to the unstudied eye. He sits in a smooth movement and crosses his legs, straightens Will's jacket over his knee. He has no reason to be nervous in a federal building. That's not what this is.

This is as close to true anger as Hannibal Lecter gets.

This place is responsible for repeated abuses on Will's mind, in Hannibal's opinion. Abuses. Not just trauma, not just the depression that plagues anyone who's been staring at opened bodies for too long. And not just a standard burnout or career fatigue.

Will was safe in a classroom until Jack Crawford sniffed him out to use against the Ripper.

Getting close is what Will does, but Jack kept him too close to it for too long. Hannibal wants him to run away with him to fucking Maine to ensure an end to that.

He already has Will's word that this is over, but he can't trust the FBI's cooperation in his plans.

Will stands at a window. He watches a column of Marines run by on PT.

He doesn't share Hannibal's anger. Without Jack there, who could possibly bully him into continuing his work?

No one has the balls of Jack Crawford.
The conference room gives the meeting a feel of informality compared to the large, mirrored interrogation room he somehow expected to be led to.

But this is Oversight. Not the BSU.

Will is settled at the table for a few minutes before a definite smell of politics wafts into the room and a couple of suits enter. One man has a high-level FBI ID clipped to his jacket and the other is armed only with a latte and an iPhone. He doesn't use a headset and he speaks at volume, derisively, about people who are, you know, not very Washington.

Congressional Aide or DOJ?

Gotta be Congress. He's wearing a watch that's way out of any real public servant's price range.

Will suddenly wonders if he was supposed to have someone with him. He's not an employee anymore and he didn't inform the union of this meeting. He wonders if Beverly is out in the field or a couple floors down. She'd watch his back no matter what happened.

A fucking stenographer takes a corner seat. It's a little more promising that this will be set up like a deposition. If they're on record, Congress over there will have less to say.

If there's a stenographer, there's going to be a record - public records that can be requested. He could go back downstairs and get an ID for Hannibal to at least sit in with him.

No.

Maybe he wouldn't want to be on the record here. Will is a part of his private life, now, but that doesn't mean he gets to decide for the both of them how or when people on the outside are allowed to know that. And Will doesn't want anyone here to have the chance to interrogate Hannibal on the traumatic events that happened in his own home.

Better to leave him out of it.

Although.

He doesn't know. Judging by what Hannibal's said, lately - might be better to let him decide that for himself? Some small, incredibly pleased little part of Will preens over the idea that he has someone, now, who wants to be involved in the ugly things, the mundanities, the bad days - all facets of his life.

Or. Maybe he shouldn't get ahead of himself, there. Still plenty of time coming up for them to bore each other to an early death.

The agent who showed him upstairs waits with one foot on each side of the threshold, glancing down the hall and tapping her phone on occasion to check the time. He probably has a couple minutes. He could ask if Hannibal can come up. He can request Beverly.

But why risk that this goes on even a few minutes longer? Involving either of them could be a complication and he just wants this to be as fast and simple as possible.

He stays put, trying not to betray anything - indecision, boredom, impatience - as the passing minutes
almost make his fingers tap and his knees sway. He holds still. Keeps a firm grip on his nerves.

There's a short murmur of voices as the rest of the expected party comes in and the agent shuts the door.

A knock, soon after, as they're settling. And she turns back to get it. They have a whispered conversation with the door mostly closed while the steno guy gets his instructions from a few people who are definitely Oversight.

One of the Oversight agents keeps looking at Will. Glancing. Trying not to make a big deal out of it. Kid probably wrote a thesis on him or something. He looks a little amazed. Two others are the agents who showed up at Hannibal's house to take his badge and gun. Will had one of the other ones in a class... a few years back? He remembers because he had to talk to her supervisor about some of the work she handed in.

Will is probably the reason she was disqualified from recruitment into her first-choice division.

She didn't have the imagination required for behavioral science investigation. She should have gone to organized crime - she had a perfect grasp of mafia hierarchies and procedures, arms running - so it's.... kind of funny that she ended up in Internal Investigations and Oversight.

Yeah. No chance of corruption there. He'd laugh a bit if he wasn't busy holding still.

The agent at the door accepts a file box from the woman in the hall but objects to her entering the room.

The head of the Oversight division looks toward the door like it were the persistent buzzing of a fly. "What is it?" she snaps.

The woman in the hall is allowed to peek in.

Will doesn't know her name. He knows she's Beverly's boss. The new Jack Crawford.

"You can have a seat," the Oversight chief allows. But her glance towards the chairs at the back of the room is dismissive, clearly relegating the BSU Interim Chief to the sidelines.

There are seven people seated across from Will.

The Oversight Chief.
Congress.
An Assistant Director.
Four other Oversight agents, all of them looking... so young to him, for some reason.
The agent who was on the door takes a seat at one far end of the conference table and the stenographer is at the other.
The new BSU director is back by the windows, sitting quietly where she was waved off to.

And Will faces them all.

Congress finally hangs up and wants to start but the AD gives him a look and the woman in charge of Oversight, all pinched lines and under-medicated stress, flips open her folders.

One of her juniors takes out a couple evidence bags from the box and piles them to the side.

"Mr. Graham. Formerly of the BSU and the Academy's Behavioral Division," she brings her eyes up, impatient. "Correct?"
"Correct," he takes his time drawling his answer just because it seems like it would irk her.

"So." She slides a few pages left and right across the table. Congress barely glances at the pages she shares. The Assistant Director gets his reading glasses out. "You're here to walk us through a timeline on the death of one Dr. Abel Gideon, escaped patient, Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The night of-

"Why, exactly?" he interrupts.

She stops.

The AD looks up over his glasses.

"We need specifics," Congress says. "Lot of dirt surrounding this man, Gideon. He was on his way to trial against a prominent member of the medical community, a Dr. Chilton, who is currently in recovery from- I think we would all agree? A harrowing situation. Truly harrowing." He emphasizes *harrowing* like it's on his 365 Power Vocabulary calendar on his desk and he's thrilled to have an opportunity to use the Monday word.

Will could easily hate this man. Doesn't even want to acknowledge him, but he has to ask, "And you are?"

"Of course, introductions-" the AD says, and they go around the table but not the whole room.

Congress is actually *Paul from Justice*. DOJ, then, despite his looks. Assistant Director Newton doesn't tell them which departments he's over but Will would guess he's the go-between for the FBI and local law enforcement in the northeast, and Oversight is "Ms. Martin and her team."

They kind of start over.

Martin takes a deep breath, "The issue, Mr. Graham, was recently discovered in evidence. There were obviously more pressing issues than Abel Gideon's death after the fact-"

"Clearly before it, as well," he adds, looking at the clouds rolling by out the window, over her head.

"There was a manhunt for Gideon," she attempts to correct him but he never did feel like taking superiority bullshit, even when he was employed here.

"Abel Gideon waltzed into Doctor Lecter's home in a fine Burberry jacket, new shoes that were to his tastes, and clothes that fit him perfectly. Did you try the mall in your big, fat, all-encompassing manhunt?"

"There wasn't exactly a credit trail to follow on him, Mr. Graham and perhaps the duties of FBI agents-"

"What about a credit trail on the very much alive and incapacitated Dr. Chilton?" Will shrugs. "I kinda doubt he's been in the position to check his bank's text alerts over the past few weeks."

Dead silence in the room.

They checked Alana's and Jack's. They probably had eyes on Gideon's surviving extended family and his private storage lockers.

They wouldn't have invaded Chilton's privacy, though, what with his guts having already been invaded once this month. Chilton seems like a man used to excesses he can't afford, so continued
spending would hardly set off alarms if his credit companies weren't informed.

The agents to Martin's right turn to whisper and one gets up, leaves hastily.

"There is still," she clears her throat (that's more anxiety than necessity), "the issue of your disappearance on the night of Agent Crawford's murder."

"I've been well accounted for by Doctor Lecter. I went to his place. I was burning up with fever, barely had any idea what was going on-"

"Yet you managed to walk to his house - three miles, to his house, according to reports."

"Someplace safe. The only safe place I knew since-" he stops himself short of pointing out the obvious about Crawford. The man's dead and these people have adopted his holy mission against the Ripper, after all.

"Safe place or safe house?" She fires back. "According to recent information, you've taken up residence with Doctor Lecter? Maybe you got a ride to your accomplice's home or-"

"I have not taken up residence-" (yet) "-and if having Encephalitis is a crime worthy of requiring an alibi-"

"Jordan," she says to one of her agents, the wide-eyed one. He passes Martin both evidence bags. She puts them on the table in front of her.

Knives.

The knife Will used on Gideon with the German words. The giant knife Hannibal lodged in Gideon's heart.

Martin starts slapping blood analysis reports on the table in front of her.

"There are two main types of knives," she says. "Stamped and forged. The large chef's life here," she taps Hannibal's knife, "is an example of the forged variety. Not quite so easy for particulate matter to become lodged in the handle," she points. "As you can see, the handle comes with a kind of finger guard in forged knives." She's enjoying sounding this smart. These are Beverly's or Price's words coming out of her mouth. "And the handle is formed in such a way that, in really well-crafted ones, there's no gaps where bacteria could form or water could seep in and damage the material, or rust or mold any material away. Then," she points to Will's knife, "there are stamped knives. Smaller ones. Where the handle is placed around the steel after the fact. Stamped knives are weaker, more flexible. And the one you used is, of course, lighter. Has a specific purpose in the kitchen. Now, your knife. Once we processed the evidence? We found several blood samples. Here," she points, "in the little cracks of the handle.

"One would expect a person who works in their kitchen with Doctor Lecter's enthusiasm might cut themselves every so often. If we found the Doctor's blood on his own tools?" she shrugs. "That wouldn't be significant. We didn't, though. Must be very practiced." One of the reports has a different logo on it - not a federal one, but from a hospital. Hannibal's DNA on file. She flips the page over and files it back away.

"Dr. Gideon's blood," she pushes two pages across the table, closer to him. "Found on both blades. Your blood?" there's the sheet with his own DNA sample. She flips it over and files it. "Found on neither blade. But, then." She pushes another paper forward, watching him as she does.

She flips it so he can read it, right side up.
Jack Crawford's DNA.

She slides the paper to the left. Next to the knife Will used.

But Will isn't an idiot. This is just a sample page - evidence that the FBI has Jack's blood typed and on file.

This page is not a comparison between samples.

So he asks the question: "Are you explicitly stating that you found Jack Crawford's blood on one of these knives?"

"We found several-

"Several samples in the hilt of the stamped knife. Right. Samples from... pig? Poultry? Cow, I'm guessing. Fish. Plenty of blood in a kitchen. Plenty more blood in a kitchen where everyone - including myself, Jack Crawford, Fredrick Chilton, Alana Bloom, and countless other friends have inexpertly wielded knives as best as Doctor Lecter could teach us to. Hannibal Lecter has a wide social circle and Bella Crawford knows her husband has had dinner at his house. So either you're implying with a-" he taps it, "-printout that Jack cut himself slicing onions or you're about to turn over another sheet of paper comparing Jack's blood to the samples left in the knife." He sits back. "So? I'm ready."

They can't always tell where blood comes from. If the knife has been cleaned well enough and often enough and been around for, possibly, generations, the sample could be corrupted or so miniscule that there's no way to even tie it to someone except to tell that it's likely human.

"In other words, you, like Jack Crawford, are so desperate to tie the Chesapeake Ripper's crimes to somebody that, now, you're looking to the guy who was deathly ill and the psychiatrist whom the two victims trusted implicitly. Yeah. That went off the rails," he sighs for them because they refuse to do it themselves. "Were there actually any gaps you needed me to fill in about how two people outside the FBI managed to do your job for you and take down Gideon? Or was this just a half-baked ambush?"

Martin shuts the pages back in her folder and passes the bags over to her staff again. Will is kind of sad for Hannibal that he won't get his knives back. It seems like the old German ones were packed away because they had sentimental value and the other was clearly efficient. There were pieces of Hannibal's kitchen floor stuck into the blood on the tip of the blade, visible through the evidence bag.

He remembers that moment with pride, now. Maybe because, sitting here, enduring this, he's kind of been channeling Hannibal's strength. Showing Will the knife only served to remind him that there's no better, saner, more powerful partner for him.

Forged. Hannibal is that solid, efficient blade.

Stamped. Will is no less sharp. He may be flexible, possibly too absorbent, but he gets the job done.

The implication that Will had anything to do with Jack's death is wild. Crawford was still alive when Will went into the hospital and Beverly told him that Hannibal didn't leave his side for the first two days.

Feeling this way, right now, knowing that Hannibal is down in the lobby, patient but deeply worried, angry at a dead man and glad to have his partner still living -- Will has never been more sure of him.
Hannibal led him to the right choices. The FBI only ever directed him to the wrong ones.

"Very quick with that blade, Will. Very precise, too." Martin flips her pages and pulls out a photo taken on the autopsy table. The backs of Gideon's ankles.

"Pull out the other one," he requests.

"Other one?"

"The wild stab I made for literally any vital organ I could think of and subsequently missed by a mile. My second hit to Gideon's torso."

She bites the inside of her mouth.

She does flip the pages, then. To Gideon's bisected heart. Two heavy halves pulled from his chest, Hannibal's neat knifework split it in two.

"A former surgeon put a clean hit through a human heart. Next thing you're gonna tell me is how interesting it was that you found Hannibal's fingerprints all over his own kitchen." He smiles. "Ms. Martin. Piece of advice: if this agency steps into Jack Crawford's footsteps to fill the void he left, you're all gonna be shouting at shadows for the next three years until the Ripper emerges again. Don't do that to yourselves. I learned my lesson," he shrugs again. "Maybe... consider the benefits of a therapist."

Martin doesn't move. Doesn't smirk. Doesn't suck her teeth or flinch. AD Newton settles back in his seat.

And nods to the agent on the sidelines. "Starling."

The BAU Chief rises and she doesn't smile like Jack Crawford but he thinks he knows what's coming, anyway. She has a practiced firmness about her. A similar kind of frankness to Crawford's own gait and movements.

There's a thick file in her hands. She comes to Will's side and drops it on the table next to him. Flips it open to-

Jack splayed and displayed. A list of the sections of meat he was missing. Most of it from his back. Thick, fatty, flavorful meat.

None of his missing parts is his heart.

Will instantly gets the Ripper's joke, there.

He can feel the tightening in his throat. His chest. She flips the photos over. Over. Over. Different angles. Jack's eyes turned up to God in horror.

Will turns his eyes back up to Martin. Then skips over her, hoping the dismissal pierces her.

He looks to AD Newton and his friend from the Department of Justice. "If I had known you just expected me to work for free, I would have asked my union rep to join us," he taps the table twice and scoots his chair back. Rises. "You genuinely have nothing more concerning the closeout on Gideon's case file," he takes his glasses off, folds them up, hangs them on his collar. "So that's the last I want to hear from you."

"We can't grow talent like yours," Newton rises as he speaks. "Shame for you to leave so much
work undone."

Paul stands with him, "I represent interests in the DOJ close to high-profile."

"The shame," Will talks over him, "was that you gave Jack Crawford so much power he thought he was invincible. He thought he could bend the law to his will to get his man. You let the Chesapeake Ripper prove him wrong. You may as well have killed Agent Crawford, yourselves." He sees a photo, slid from the rest of the packet, just eyes - eyes looking up. The fear in Jack's eyes one more time. Before Will leaves the room.

The Ripper is a different animal. He didn't make a martyr out of Jack Crawford like Jack may have wanted - he crippled the FBI's ability to retain good people and think straight without them. The Ripper is smart and he did himself the favor of ending Jack exactly when his fervor made him cross the line.

Everybody in this room knows Will could sue the Bureau for processing his resignation and not stopping Jack from using him, anyway. Will worked without being an agent. He stepped onto crime scenes with an invalidated badge. Jack called him into the office when Will was too sick with fever to check that he never got a fucking bi-weekly direct deposit on two consecutive paydays.

Issuing back pay doesn't change the fact that Jack manipulated him and broke both FBI Procedure and employment law. He probably thought he was bending the less-important of all the laws he could have but, hell, Capone was brought down for tax evasion.

And if the FBI buckled under pressure like that - the FBI as a whole, represented by Jack on a power trip - then who's to say their new chief, Starling (also clearly willing to press the point with Will, even if he isn't on payroll) won't do it to other subordinates?

Two phone calls - they're not his best friends on earth, but if Will called Beverly and told her about this ambush and then called one of his contacts at Yale or BATF or the NCIS for her, Beverly would consider leaving, too. As she went, so would Price. Eventually, Zeller. The FBI would start to hemorrhage good minds to the US Marshals, the DOJ, DHS... plenty of agencies and universities will pick up the phone for a good analyst in want of a less-demanding, less soul-sucking career.

Wouldn't it be amazing if the Chesapeake Ripper's continued success were simply due to piss-poor employee turnover?

Jack's legacy: A Bureaucratic Failure.

Will couldn't save himself. He needed to lean on Hannibal to do that. So it can't possibly be his place to take up Jack's sword and slice at the sky. Their last-ditch attempt to get Will to see through the Ripper's eyes one more time was ham-handed and futile.

And to make matters worse, they accused Hannibal of colluding with Will in some way. They didn't say it outright, but the halves of Gideon's heart spoke a thousand words about what kind of accusations they might be inclined to throw Hannibal's way if forced.

That's a lot like the mistake that Jack made.

Whatever mission Jack could have planted and nurtured inside of Will, he failed to cultivate when he took fucking attitude about Hannibal killing Budge before Budge could be caught, processed, and credited as a BSU win.

If Crawford cared that Hannibal were injured-
If Crawford cared that Will is human-
Things might have been different.

Will sees the Ripper's light in Jack's eyes. And has a feeling fewer people will die if he fades into the dark, himself.

Speaking of dark, his vision is getting a little black around the edges by the time he steps off the elevator and turns his visitor ID in. He walks straight out the door instead of coming to Hannibal.

He breathes in the crisp air and relearns how to process oxygen for a while.

Hannibal does follow. (Always does.)

He puts Will's coat over his shoulders and slowly walks him back to the Bentley, a gentle hand on his back.

Even sits him inside and pushes the seatbelt into his hands.

He gets the car heated up before he asks, clearly trying not to make it a demand, "What did they do to you?" he gathers Will's hands up and warms them himself. They're more icy than the air outside. "Will. You won't be going back into that building ever again. I need you to give me what burdens you. Let it go. Free it and be rid of this place."

Jack's eyes. He's already forgetting what they looked like. Whether the veins stood out or not. Whether they were dilated or not. Their true expression and direction.

He just saw what he normally sees. His own hands digging into the wounds he's carved and pulling out the choice cuts. He reads the Ripper's rage in plain language. He had one last use for Jack, one loud point to make, and didn't let him have a final word.

Will remembers the list. His tongue was gone.

Will's breathing ratchets up. He didn't want to see anymore. He just didn't want to and he knows, now, that Agent Starling - Crawford's replacement - she saw what he read and if she gets stuck, she'll come hound him for answers. She will force him to see.

He remembers her picture from a damn employee newsletter. She was the Bureau's fastest shot, three years running. Out on loan to the DEA. Jack taught her well. She came back with an agenda. She'll take up his fallen flag.

This shit shouldn't have bothered him so much. He's confused.

He changed too fast -- which is only a testament to how much he wants to leave Quantico behind. He was looking forward to being safe with Hannibal.

Killing Gideon wasn't as much of a shock to Will's system as Garret Jacob Hobbs. At the time, he didn't know Abigail; he'd never confronted and shot a serial killer before, there was blood everywhere, there were still so many questions-

But Abel Gideon was in his friend's home. A place Will maybe thinks of a little too reverently. And he was circling Hannibal like cornering prey.

Will loves Hannibal. The form and shape of this is still morphing, still new and raw. But it was Gideon or Hannibal.

Will loves Hannibal. No question, Gideon had to go.
Hannibal unbuckles him and reaches to hold his head close.

Will wants to kiss him. Wants to go home.

Wants to be done with this place.

"I can wait for you. In Maine. I can... I don't know. Supervise. Make sure the walls get painted and... start building the big, ridiculous doghouse I talked about... and-"

Hannibal kisses his head. "So good, Will. Hush, now. They tried to make you solve their case for them," he guesses.

"Jack," is all he can say.

"Come to my house. Come away with me and I'll feed you and then you can help me pack up the office."

He clamps his eyes closed on relived tears. "God, yes."

Hannibal turns his head up and takes a fierce kiss from him. And he doesn't move the car an inch until Will is slumped in his seat, head on Hannibal's shoulder, and taking calming breaths.

Will reaches to tap the stereo on and a harp plays.

The tops of flagpoles and trees fly by.

He does not watch Quantico disappear behind them.

«»

The kitchen is a stained place and his history there, with Hannibal, isn't what he would like.

Making lunch is about the long, soothing, involved last steps in the processes of making a consommé.

Hannibal had refrigerated a batch so he could get the very last of the grease and fat out of it with cheesecloth.

They eat lunch kind of late, but it's worth it. The broth is so clear and intensely flavored.

Will wants to be absorbed and happy like Hannibal is in his kitchen. He tries to figure out when he feels most like that. Maybe fishing. Maybe he shouldn't start off his relationship with Abigail making her into a fisherman - he should ask her how she hunts. He can be a student in the kitchen and in the wilds both. He can read that cookbook and start practicing with Hannibal.

It doesn't feel natural to talk aloud about these things until they're at Hannibal's office. He hasn't packed anything up, but there's a sign outside his office announcing the relocation.

"Is anyone following you to Maine?"

"Some are. Those who can afford the commute," he smiles, hanging their jackets. "Most will be sitting with colleagues by next week. My last appointment is tomorrow."

Will nods. "So. Where do we start?"

The private exit is full of flat boxes, waiting to be built. Will gets to work on that while Hannibal
starts the fire and... feeds some of his paperwork into it.

"Waste not," he shrugs.

Will nods again, fussing with the end of a tape roll. He hesitates, as he always does when bringing new problems into this room. "They um. Well." He changes his mind four or five times.

"The agents you met with?" he gently prompts.

Will sighs and shifts to lean against the wall while he folds up the first flat. "They're not going to stop. They're... they're gonna guilt me into taking a look at their crime scenes no matter how much I avoid them."

"We can use a private remailing service to redirect your mail," Hannibal stands, warms his hands for a moment, and moves to the ladder. "It will at least complicate the process of tracking you down for a time. And when they arrive at my door, I can say that you've gone sailing."

"I mean, thanks, but if they can't find me for long enough, then they'll just assume you killed me, apparently," he punctuates this with a long, loud jerk of the packing tape.

But Hannibal only laughs. "Then I'll go tell them you're safe and sound, tied up in the basement."

Okay, that... "... Is that actually a thing we're gonna do?"

Hannibal laughs again and grins, climbing up to the books in the loft. "What makes them fear for your disappearance at my hands?"

"Well. They found particulate matter in the cracks of your knife handle but they didn't have enough of a sample to tell who the blood was from. They had yours, mine, Jack's, Gideon's. They wanted it to match Jack's. I think they were pinning me as the Ripper for using the knife I did and maybe you as a back-up suspect. Or accomplice. Grabbing at straws."


"Hey, I wouldn't be surprised if you had stabbed Jack at some point. There were times I could have clocked him."

"He truly did not deserve you."

There's this... weird edge to Hannibal's voice that gives him pause. It's a shade of the anger he clearly didn't mean to betray this morning at Quantico.

A flavor of...

Will's suddenly reviewing their interactions. The language Hannibal has used to talk about the way Jack acted when Will was concerned.

*He truly did not deserve you.*

It almost sounds like--

If he's putting the pieces together in the right order--

Will finishes the first two boxes and brings them over. Hands them up the ladder and ascends to Hannibal's side.
Hannibal waits, knowing the look of someone with a dangerous thought on the tip of their tongue.

"You know... you know Jack and I weren't... having an affair, right?"

Hannibal is surprisingly blank. Shifts two books between his hands.

This is so out of nowhere. "I mean... did you think- did you have some idea that-"

"I knew he had your respect. To the extent that you let him use you. I didn't know how deep that might have been-" he pauses. "In what direction it might have-" he stops again. "Sometimes, the way he looked at you made me wonder. He confessed to me over dinner, once, the distance between himself and his wife. As she later expressed to me, it was a reason she withheld a significant personal development from him."

Bella's cancer. When Jack felt distanced from his wife, Hannibal saw him getting closer to his job. Closer to Will.

"We never, ever- I mean there was never a point I ever considered-"

"I knew your mission was something you had effectively absorbed from Jack." And if that isn't enough to knock Will off his feet, Hannibal adds, "It greatly concerned me how much you came to cower before him. What you let him do to you. I thought there might be an element you were allowing under the impression that he might someday-"

"You thought I'd turn to him and ask him to hit me harder?"

Hannibal finally meets his eyes. "Sometimes, you felt most useful when you were of service to Jack. It." He hesitates. "It was hard to watch. When you recognized your instability and buried yourself in work as if Jack could spare the time to prop you up. Relying on someone that manipulative-"

"Hold on a second," he blinks a few times. "Did you think I was trying to get him to... dominate me back into shape?"

Hannibal stands a little taller. Defiant. "I pushed the point of challenging his role in your life because, if I saw the subconscious opportunity present itself, Jack Crawford was sure to be the next to notice. He would have seized that opportunity and you would have been in the middle before you realized."

Will remembers the day he found himself too-suddenly at Hannibal's office. After West Virginia. The day Hannibal finally lost a single ounce of calm and essentially told Will to snap out of it and recognize that he was in danger of harming himself more than he could ever help others.

It was harsh but it rattled him just enough. It woke him up to reality.

Hannibal said he was abusing his mind with overstimulation and triggers.

No.

He said *Will was being abused.*

Then he recovered, rephrasing it by saying the abuse he was referring to was the triggering done in the line of duty.

But, no.

Hannibal had meant what he originally said.
He wasn't just afraid that Will was gonna lose himself to saving the nameless masses. He was afraid he would lose Will to Jack, first.

"Uh." He scrubs at his hair. We're not talking standard jealousy, here. Clearly Will and Hannibal getting together was kind of an afterthought. Completely unplanned. They fell for each other.

Will knows himself - he's healthy, now. He fell for Hannibal. He knows what happened and he knows that, the more this goes on, the more it turns into something that's helping him grow. Changing him for the better.

And where would he be, by now, if he had followed Jack? If he were still following his every order, against the bounds of his health and sanity?

Well. Probably the same place as Alana and Crawford.

Sacrificing himself for something that's proven itself inevitable as the sunrise and tides: People killing other people.

It wouldn't have been noble to die at Jack's side. It would have been about Jack feeling close to the Ripper and continuing to be three steps behind him. And Will, servile and lost at his heels.

Whereas, here? He's adding a subtle kind of depth to Hannibal's life.

True, Will has a lot less to offer Hannibal than he's getting in return.

But he's part of an actual team here.

He knows that because they say so constantly. They don't make decisions around each other, they make them with one another.

The FBI isn't a team like Will and Hannibal are.

Teams are an illusion in the workplace. A way to build cohesion and get tasks done.

But they're not real.

*This* team is real.

Maybe Hannibal didn't directly save his life but he did wake Will up. It might have even been for a strange reason. But he's still here. He still cares.

When Will does something ridiculous like calls Hannibal his *home*, he's also fine with that total weirdness.

Hannibal can't stand the silence anymore. He knows Will has slipped off someplace. He knows setting eyes on another crime scene has totaled his concentration for the day and put him in a bad headspace. Then to have this discussion on top of it?

"Will," he calls softly. "I don't know if you're cross with me. Perhaps you have reason to be. But may I touch you anyway?"

He nods, kinda numb.

Hannibal just draws Will's hands from his hair and pulls them to his own mouth. He kisses one of Will's knuckles and bites the same knuckle on the opposite hand. Leaves a print of his teeth in Will's finger and then presses the marks.
The FBI had some shitty people. Some nice people. Some people who were good at their jobs. Some people who could care less.

Just like any other job.

Hannibal makes some oddball decisions. But he protected Abigail, putting himself in danger in the process, after Nicholas Boyle's attack, by helping her hide the body. It might have been an ill-conceived scheme, but he did it to protect her. He stabbed Gideon clean through the heart to stop him from taking the knife out of his belly and coming after Will.

And he clearly wishes he were deeper into Will's life to protect him from his own head.

When Will woke up, here in this office, he should have put himself in Hannibal's hands entirely. Hannibal's been building this idea of them as a team slowly and carefully. He didn't wanna push it.

Suddenly Will wants him to push.

He takes his hands back and presses close, until Hannibal is holding him.

His teammate. He can trust his teammate.

"I felt like it was me. Like I was seeing my own handiwork. For one. more. moment. in that building, I felt like they were envisioning the Ripper's tools in my hands and if I slipped for one second, I felt like I could show them. Like I could wear the Ripper and shut them up and make them leave me alone."

Hannibal breathes heavily into his skin. "Will. I have no doubts about you. I never do. I will always know your truth."

"I know," he grips Hannibal tighter. Hannibal tightens around him in response and he feels like--"Thank you. God, I'm glad to be home. I'm... I'm home."

"You are. I am here, sweet Will."

"I'm not mad at you. I'm not exactly flattered. But I... I do understand. You didn't know how much to worry about me but, if something manipulative was possible, you wouldn't put it past Jack to try it out."

Hannibal breathes in at his neck. "I was also simply jealous and wanted you all for myself," he confesses.

Will laughs. "Well, I'm such a catch when I'm sweating and hallucinating, who could resist?"

Hannibal kisses his head. Turns him and kisses his mouth.

"I should get back to my boxes," he touches Hannibal's neck and skids fingers up to his jaw. He needs to help with this. He needs to do the teamwork so Hannibal doesn't realize what a crap deal he just made inviting Will to live with him.

"Are you going home tonight or will you sleep with me?"

Will sighs, shrugs. It feels like asking too much to invite himself over.

"Mm. I do need an answer. You see, if I get to keep you, I'll wait until later to ravish you."
"Ravish?" Will laughs again.

"But if there is no dinner, no Will Graham in my bed, I have to make the most of this empty building and fill it with your voice."

Okay. That's appealing, too. Will squints off. "Iiiii'm wondering why not both," he draws out.

It gets him kissed again. "Because, perhaps, if I send you back to your boxes, you'll give in and warm my bed again tonight. I must gamble for my time with you, I think."

Deep breaths. A few more kisses.

Might as well.

And while they're in this place, where people lay themselves bare before him, Will turns the focus on the Good Doctor for once. They pack boxes and talk and he gets to learn some about Hannibal.

The things on the surface, mostly. His past, in general.

They skirt around things that are clearly painful and Will's fine with coming back to them another time.

When Hannibal is naked and towering above him in bed that night, Will still doesn't know the stories behind his scars. But he'll have time to let his teammate tell him.

All that really matters is how alive they feel there, together.

«»

Everything Will could want to bring to his new home, his home with Hannibal, is packed by the week's end.

They're working separately for a while. Hannibal had his last appointment, then needed to fill out paperwork with Mesidor to have the realty company sell his properties. He packed most of his house by himself and hired a company to take the boxes up.

And entrusted Will with them as they went.

He arrives just as the painters are leaving. The foundation and electric had been checked. There were no leaks and whatever cracks could be found were patched and drying along with the soothing grays and velvety reds Hannibal chose for the walls.

Beverly pulls off her hat and wanders in after him. Stamps her boots on the rug.

"Wow," she breathes. "Moving on up."

Even if Hannibal won't be coming back up until the last of his business is finished in Baltimore...

This still feels wonderful. Still feels like coming home.

"You gotta show me around. This is..." she trails off.

"Yeah. Yeah," he breathes.

The dogs are in their cars. The rented trailers attached to each are full of Will's stuff.
They have to walk the pack. Feed them. Start hauling boxes inside.

But Will also wants to just stand there, in the entryway, and feel himself smiling.

When his eyes finally fall her way, Beverly is grinning at him. "Married rich."

"Not married," he has no reason to blush at the teasing except that he knows more of it is coming. "I'm gonna turn on the heat. Open the back gate. Lead them around the side?"

"Sure," she shrugs. "I think they're gonna bolt, though."

No. The pack loves Beverly because she loves to play. She's the only person who's never had to tempt them with food.

"They won't go far."

She shrugs again and pulls the front door closed.

He tries to kick all the snow off his boots before trooping through the house, but keeps to the leftover canvas and plastic protecting the floors, anyway.

Through the kitchen and to the back door. He hears the heat click on and decides he can build a fire to chase away the paint fumes tomorrow.

Starts an entire mental list of what else needs to be done before Hannibal arrives.

Before he comes home.

He does blush more as he meets Beverly in the back yard because he knows damn well he can't stop grinning.

"Gonna miss you, goofball," she knocks a fist into his shoulder.

"You can come visit."

"You need to build a deck and have parties out here."

Jesus, she's right. A deck is exactly what's missing out back. That's apparent, even under all the snow.

"Good point. Will you come visit, then?"

"If there are parties? Heck yeah. You think Hannibal has any tall, dark, handsome foreign pals he can invite from his prep school days or whatever? I could stand to marry rich, too, but I don't want someone who knows when I'm snarking at him."

He rolls his eyes at her and leads the way back to the car to get dogfood. They're just gonna have to rip a bag open and leave it back here until Will's got something set up.

Beverly points at the naked posts jutting out of the snow, far off. "Why did I have to wait for your slow ass to unlock the gate if I could have just walked around it?"

"Because I wanted to see how long it took you to figure that out," he manages not to laugh.

"God, you're a dick."
"Yep."

"I'm so glad we're getting rid of you."

"I know."

There are boxes in each room, already. Couches and bare mattresses. Empty tables and desks.

Will's gonna be letting people in and out over the next few days. One man is supposed to be coming to fit the new cabinets, another to measure the kitchen counters to build a cart - *build a cart from scratch* that can be wheeled out and brought tableside for serving. The security company already wired the house, but they're installing a panel that he'll have to learn how to work. There's large equipment that's already arrived in the basement. They were hooked up and installed and Hannibal imported charcuterie from Spain and Italy which already hangs in one of the cooled, sealed rooms spreading "happy bacteria" that's supposed to influence any meats that Hannibal carves, grinds, or... sausages down here by himself.

"Huh," Beverly wonders at it when Will gives her the tour. "You know what I just realized?"

"What's that?" he shrugs.

"This may be your very last night on this planet."

He laughs. "Excuse me?"

"Down on this planet with the rest of us plebs," she explains. "When Hannibal comes home, he's not gonna wanna see leftover Chinese boxes in the fridge. He'd shudder at the thought. So we're gonna bring in your measly furniture and order take-out and drink Bud because it's your last day on earth. I'm your last excuse for roughing it," she sways, knocks an elbow into him, smiling. "So pizza, or?"

"Jesus. This is suddenly... a really heavy decision. Um."

"You know what?" she starts wandering back upstairs. "First of all, this is still a basement and therefore still creepy, so I'm outta here. Second," she paces up the stairs, "I think I better decide for the both of us. You're probably already infected with 'happy bacteria.'"

"Possibly," he follows her back into the daylight that pours into the empty dining room.

She snaps her fingers. "We gotta bar-hop. That's our only option. Start with burgers, get some whiskey in us--"

"Find some wonton soup and then some beer."

"You still got it, I guess, but I'm gonna have to crash on one of your couches tonight and I'm warning you - I don't wanna wake up with any fine fucking linens on me in the morning."

"Yes ma'am."

She stops and looks out over the garden. Over the snow hiding the garden and the stone walkway Will cleared for the dogs to sit and eat at.

"Don't call me ma'am," she adds. "Wow. All this is really... it really is beautiful, Will. The stuff we see every day at work? I can imagine you've got layers of that mess in your head. I think if anything is gonna smother that? This place will. Look at those trees," she breathes. "Look at the whole damn forest you own."
He leans against the window a little. "Hannibal owns it."

The look she narrows at him and the hands to the hips call him an idiot. "He's got austere covered and you've got self-deprecation for miles. You balance out. Considering I want to see you happy, can you straighten the fuck up and claim credit for this a little? Like..." she weighs her words for a moment, eyes taking in the garden again. "Please don't dump this back in his lap. Please let this be what you need it to be. Allow yourself the peace. Okay?"

He blows warm air over the window, a hazy spot that soon fades. "Yeah. Okay."

"You don't have to play wounded your whole life. Is all I'm saying," she shrugs. "Let it get fixed. Maybe you go back out onto the field someday. Maybe you don't."

Beverly is great about not smothering him. This is about the extent of it.

She slugs him in the arm again and turns to go start unloading the cars.

It's hard to say goodbye to her the next morning. Not just because both of them are slightly hungover and shuffling uncomfortably in a Denny's parking lot with bellies full of medicinal greasy food.

Mostly because he didn't appreciate her as a good friend until the friendship suddenly got 700 miles stuffed between its two endpoints.

She cuffs him on the shoulder a lot. She does it one more time before she says, "Alright. Hug me. But carefully, you know, so I don't barf."

He does. "Please think of me the next time you get fast food. Eat fries in my memory."

"Oh," she laughs, "you're gonna get a text every time I hit McDonald's from now on. You shouldn't have opened that box."

He laughs too, and sends her off.

Stands in the parking lot, exhaling in puffs of mist.

He wants to go home. It's a good feeling to even want that so much.

There's a bedroom on the first floor with a side-door out to the back. Will is letting the dogs stay in there. He figures he'll limit them to the room, call it his office, and maybe let them in the main room to sit by the fireplace. It's actually a lot more space than they had in Wolf Trap. And the yard is wide, the fence still incomplete. Yeah, plenty of room for the pack.

Lots of things to do before Hannibal gets there. Right now he's gotta go let the cabinet guy in.

He picks up another coffee on the way. Cringes when he rolls up the driveway to see a van already parked there.

"Sorry," he calls, clumsily shuts down the engine. "Sorry," he says again, walking up to unlock the front.

"Mr. Graham?"

"Yeah. 'S me. Didn't mean to be late."

"No, you're right on time," he shuts his van up and follows Will into the house.
From that point he feels like he's just a doorman, signing papers, accepting receipts, answering the doorbell.

And he has to keep shuffling the dogs out back so they don't go crazy with all the visitors.

Hannibal calls around noon, when the last of the new glass-fronted cabinets are being installed in the kitchen. He dodges the woman measuring for curtains and escapes to his office. Shuffles the dogs away from the door to shut it behind himself and nearly misses the last ring.

"Sorry," he answers with. Must be the eight-hundredth time he's just spouted the word off at someone today.

"Not at all," Hannibal responds. "Are you alright?"

"Lots of, um, appointments today."

"Yes," he sounds hesitant. "Too overwhelming?"

Will makes it to his comfy old chair and crashes down on it, the dogs nosing at his knees. "Well," he wavers. "Um."

"Ah," Hannibal gets it instantly. "I should be the one apologizing, then."

"No, no. It's alright. You were here last week. You already did so much. I wouldn't have known how to even get in contact with all these people to make your appointments, so. Yeah. I'm willing to put it in the work. Can't say I won't be happy to have the place to myself tonight, though. I had Beverly until breakfast and then..." he shrugs.

"Some of these should have waited," Hannibal says. "I could have delayed them until I was there to handle appointments personally."

"No. Seriously. I'm fine. I can handle this. I've been unemployed longer than you, at this point," he jokes. "It really should be me doing the work, anyway. I have a lull tomorrow, though, right? After the security guy at 10:30?"

"Yes. He should be but twenty minutes, according to the company. And then you'll have time for your own leisure. I do want you to relax and settle in, by the way. I don't want the first thing you feel about our home to be exhaustion."

There's an odd flicker in his chest when Hannibal says our home. Frankly, that's worth every busy moment of this restless day. "It really is beautiful here. I just. I can't wait." He finds that his voice has dropped to a whisper. "I can't wait to be beside you, here. Learning how this works. I've been lousy on my own for so long I just want to feel useful next to you."

"Please don't call my best friend lousy," Hannibal chides. Will hears him take a deep breath. "My business here is taking longer to conclude than I had planned for. You must know that I hope to be there as soon as is possible. For the first time I am finding so many social ties burdensome. I understand my friends don't expect me to disappear into the night, but I am more and more tempted by each new appointment. This house is spare, with only the furniture left for show, and I cannot even properly entertain anyone. Meanwhile all I can do from here is send harassers to my dear partner. I forget how uncomfortable and tiring it can be to move."

"You know what you have to do then, right?" Will asks.

"Do?"
"Yeah. Now you know you have to stick in one place," he smiles a little, hopeful. "Stick around with me."

"Precisely what I hope to earn through this ordeal," he sounds pleased. "If you need quiet, Will - if you need me to reschedule some of the appointments -"

"Hannibal," he smiles. "Don't. Let me deal with this. Let me be the guy who takes care of everything and just, you know. Welcomes you home when you get here. Worry about wrapping up things in Baltimore. I'm," he shrugs, "I guess I'm kinda happy I'm able to do this for someone."

"I haven't called on anyone to take care of things in the yard. I assumed it was a project you wished to undertake on your own?"

"Safe assumption. Um... also kinda wanted to know if I could have the second bedroom on the first floor. The one facing the back?"

Hannibal is quiet for an unusually long time. "Forgive me, but I had assumed you and I would be sharing the master bedroom? Upstairs? I had asked that all the other rooms be arranged and furnished with guests in mind." He sounds confused and hurt and--

Fuck yes he wants to share the master bedroom. He gets his breath back and sputters, interrupting. "Shit. Sorry. I meant-- I meant as. You know. For a desk-the dogs-office space. My. My stuff, I guess. It kind of keeps it out of the way and. Look, I mean. I know you have your styles and tastes and-"

Hannibal breathes deep over the line. "You do intend to live with me, then? With me? And... in my bed? If it's not your idea of a comfortable living situation, I understand. Will... I want you there. I deeply desire to share our space. I do," he insists. "I think-- I know, now, that we should have had this conversation before you left Virginia. Everything has been so." He stops.

"It's been a whirlwind, yeah," he agrees. "Hey, I've been letting the dogs in here. Off the back porch and they like it in here. I figure we keep them from the rest of the house. Just a few rooms down here and-"

"Absolutely," Hannibal instantly agrees. "The woman hired to work on decor and placement? Ask her to check her email and it will have my new instructions. If you require the space, it is yours. So long as you promise me one thing, Will."

"Um. Okay?"

"Promise I will find you there, upstairs in our bed, when I do finally arrive."

Heat floods Will's body. A flash like the fever zipping through him again. Something about the dark promise in Hannibal's voice and the sharp focus of his ideas. He can almost see precisely what Hannibal has pictured for them. The two of them. He can almost feel Hannibal's hand, strong and soothing, possessively pulling slow down his spine.

This craziness today - this mess, noise, all the busy activity. It's about Hannibal painting this picture to set Will inside of. It's about coming home to him, to this new paradise, entering the frame and making art of their shared life. He wants to expose Will to new, fine things. He is open to a future that neither of them have planned for yet.

But they will. Over bottles of wine, long conversation as the spring turns into summer and the sun fills the dining room with light for hours and hours longer. Illuminates the kitchen as Will's hands practice what Hannibal teaches him. Glows into their bedroom lighting the sky early for coffee and
warm, lingering touches in their private space.

Nothing like what they shared in the office, in Baltimore.

Something deeper and more personal.

He realizes he's willing to lay himself fully bare for Hannibal, now. He's heard enough of Will's ugly thoughts and his process of working through crime scenes.

Maybe Will has found someone who's willing to hear about his deep-set desires; someone who is willing to lift him above them and give him fulfilling options.

And companionship that talks back. That talks back and is sympathetic and constructive. He reaches down and Winston is close and it's nice to pet him. Always is. But. "So. I really miss you all of a sudden," he whispers.

Winston can't give him what Hannibal does in that moment. "I will be home as soon as I can. Will. Lay in our bed and let everything come into focus around you."

He breathes. "Miss you," he repeats. No appointment at the end of the day. No head-clearing conversation. No way to shake off all the voices echoing in the house, the snap of tape measures and clatter of tools. It feels like he left some useful part of himself behind when he and Beverly hauled his stuff up here. Like he left his knees behind and he's lock-step marching where he needs to go, but getting nothing done.

"It will be late by the time I'm done tonight," Hannibal says like a confession.


He's quiet for a moment. "I didn't expect how much I would enjoy being needed like this, by you."

If he weren't so hollow right now, Will would joke about it. Instead, he nods to himself. "Plenty more where that came from. Get ready."

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You're never really alone when you have eight dogs, but by the time the Bentley finally pulls up the driveway in Maine, Will feels a crushing weight lift and recognizes what it was. The last trucks are close behind, maybe a couple hours out, still, but Will gets all the pups out back and kicks his shoes off and tosses his warm hat off and waits at the threshold for Hannibal to walk up.

He doesn't bother with the other bags in his car. He just brings one. It's for the kitchen.

But he's willing to set it aside, once the door is closed, and turn to Will. Scoop him in, press him to the wall, and just reign over him.

Will makes sad, desperate noises into his mouth and Hannibal shushes him, holds him and sucks a mark under his jaw.

It's been a long week of phone calls. Just phone calls. Hannibal even had to turn in, like, memberships to social clubs, and there were some stores he had to set up deliveries from until he found comparable shops in Maine. Will has been unboxing fucking meat and trying not to mess up Hannibal's kitchen before he can even heat up his first pan there. Despite Beverly's jokes, he survived on restaurants and take-out eaten in his car just so he could hold the kitchen sacred for its true master.
After the guys were done with the last of the installations, Will bought dirt and spring seeds and bulbs and began making potted herbs for the kitchen. The ones that were there, before, were taken by the previous owner and he wants pure, perfect new ones for Hannibal to pluck and work with at a moment's notice.

He has to show him the windowsill, brimming with young sprouts, and the way the colors Hannibal picked for the accent walls have balanced a few of the rooms out, and the work he's done in the back yard--

But they can't let go of each other. Hannibal resituates him and pushes him up the wall and he hooks a leg over Hannibal's hip.

They haven't even said a word yet and--

It doesn't fucking matter.

Hannibal is home so that's it. They're home.

He's so relieved.

He's so relieved.

Hannibal bites his bottom lip raw and pulls back to breathe.

"Hi. Don't stop," Will pants.

Hannibal grins, kisses him sweetly. "Will. I don't wish to. But we'll have company soon."

"I know. So fuck me blind and leave me upstairs."

He tuts. "I thought we shouldn't unpack the last of the boxes alone. It's the least I can do after abandoning you to the rest of the arrangements."

Will wants to whine and make it super fucking difficult for him. Will's few lame attempts at dirty talk on the phone haven't taken off, but he's confident that his actual ass could convince Hannibal otherwise.

He already sees what Will's about, though. "Come show me what's new," he says. "When you are worn out and we are tripping over furniture, I will decorate our room with you."

"This 'our' and 'we' business is really romantic. You get romance points for that," Will admits. "I know that's what you aim for." He sighs. "Alright. I guess."

Hannibal lets him slide back down the wall and takes his hand. He stares at Will. He kisses his hand. Once, twice, three times.

Will's breath rattles out of him and he has to look away from the unadulterated devotion there.

"This house is ours. You are mine."

Goddamnit. Will nods.

"Come, sweet Will."

He admires the way Will saw through his tastes and perfectly arranged the little pots. He is happy to find the fridge diligently organized. He is pleased to find the notes that Will's been taking in his cookbook, studying.
He talks to Winston, when they walk outside. Like Winston has been keeping an eye on Will for him.

Winston connects to Hannibal a lot more than any of the other dogs. Like he really was charged with guarding Hannibal's teammate and, yes, thank you, he knew he was doing a good job.

Hannibal even almost knows how to properly pet him, by now.

Will had been sleeping in the main room, in front of the fireplace. On the couch that Hannibal bought especially for these new surroundings.

He hasn't touched the bed yet, and Hannibal notices. Hard not to, since he washed the new sheets, but hasn't put them on the mattress yet.

Hannibal looks resigned. He takes his coat and jacket off. Rolls up his sleeves. And they make the bed together. Then Hannibal backs him up to it until his knees hit and he sits.

"Our bed. My Will. I thought I had secured a promise from you."

There's the sound of airbreaks outside. The stillness of the house surrounds them and it will be interrupted, soon. Hand trucks and moving men and more boxes to trip over.

First, Hannibal kneels down in front of him and-

And it feels like Will is being admired.

For his part, he's drawn to Hannibal like a magnet. He wants his trust, wants to stand by him, wants to do right by him.

He begins to wonder. With Hannibal touching his thighs, pulling his hands out, palms up, taking his glasses off and cradling his head. Carding through his hair. As if posing him. As if trying to catch a vision of him in the perfect light before the scene is interrupted.

Devotion in his eyes. Like he found a work of art he couldn't look away from. Like he envied the hands that first carved such a figure and those that have been allowed to cross the ropes and touch the stone.

Will begins to wonder. If he is Hannibal's design.
The James Caird

Hannibal hired a fast, efficient company.

He directs them where to place the last major pieces of furniture and then the two of them pretty much have to just get the hell out of the way while the rest of the boxes are brought in. It's this sudden whirlwind of activity that makes it feel like Will can't even find the right place to stand.

Ten minutes ago he was warm with reunion, with presence, fullness. Their quiet connection that he had been missing and had really wanted back.

Like, he knew it would be like this for a while, but there's instantly so much activity he feels a little overwhelmed, so he kicks his boots back on and goes to the dogs. He didn't hear Jessie barking her head off from inside but he sees her panic, now. Chester is cowering. Emma is agitated. Through the back windows, in various rooms, a bunch of strangers can be seen crawling through the house.

The dogs have gotten used to it just being them and Will again. Deliveries have been sparse the past few days and they know and trust Hannibal, but the renewed commotion is clearly as disturbing to them as it just became to Will. The house is still a new place and their world is in a bit of upheaval. They'll be okay, but they're upset and he's upset and there's gotta be some way to refocus.

He was hoping for a few hours with Hannibal before the last trucks got here. He was hoping for peace. Something soft and welcoming. But now Winston is circling him, whimpering because something's up and he usually leads the way back to normality. He's Will's little problem-solver. Trying to figure it out.

This was just a sudden 90-degree turn, that's all. He just got a little yanked around by his emotions. One minute absorbing these new, ultra-focused looks from Hannibal. Then just... feeling like a half-drawn figure on a canvas that's not filled in yet.

There's an ultimate vision. Some goal Hannibal has for the place. His precision tastes, aesthetics, visual and tactile needs. A control he has to have over his environment. There's a few days until that will be crystalized.

Will was ready to be a part of that picture, finally. Didn't even recognize the full-blown need he had, after a long couple weeks of sparse contact with Hannibal, to be engulfed in him. Once that's reestablished, things will start flowing again. He just has to get a grip.

He lands ass-first on a paving stone that's still damp. The snow is melting more and more each day and the yard is looking a little slushy and hopeless, despite the few planters he's cleared and fence planks he's straightened.

This is what he is. This scene he's surrounded in, half-manic dogs and messy wet paws and winter fading.

He just wanted to be home already. So much has changed. He was ready. Ready to jump off and stand still.

He wanted them all to be home already.

Will breathes for a while. Accepts Winston and Emma into his lap. Focuses on them for a while. Through the windows, the workers are precise in where they set the new dining table and chairs.
Boxes of dishes pile in the kitchen beyond Will's pleasant little sunny spot. Someone comes outside to drop off square ceramic pots for Hannibal's dining room herbs to be replanted.

You know what he should do? Breathe. Gather his shit. Go pull the new soil and seeds and start filling them. There's no reason for him to be out of whack, here. He knew this would take time. He knew Hannibal would need to be surrounded by all his things to feel like he could settle in.

It's needy and a little bit pathetic to want to be a part of the scene, posed and exactly-placed, so much that he sits here getting damp jeans just because Hannibal didn't come home and coddle him.

Yeah.
Yeah.

It's too much, to need that much attention and focus from his partner. He bought this huge chunk of property and has only spent a couple days here, himself, getting equipment installed in the basement and looking at paint samples and shit. Hannibal needs this time. Will just has to be an adult and stay out of the way. Let him do his thing.

Yeah.

"Okay," he says to Winston. "Okay. Who wants to help me get the plant stuff, huh?" he stands and dusts himself off a little and gets the attention of all the puppies. Whistles. "Hey, guys. C'mon." He opens the greenhouse and hands the trowel to Eliot and his gloves to Sarah, and Brady and Zeke get their jaws around the bag and try to 'help' him drag it over to fill the planters. The others help by being very excited when he turns on the hose to carefully clean each container.

Concentrating on the task helps. Another of the movers comes out and sets down more planters - the bonsai trees from Hannibal's kitchen and some of the others from around the old house. He realizes his other problem is that he's dressed like one of the movers. Literally.

He gets thrown back to that what-if scenario Hannibal once presented. They had looked at a house that might work and Hannibal asked, if his significant other were inclined to move into such a place, where would Will fit? Or how would he fit? Or something like that. And he didn't really think of it as a problem, more a far-off fantasy, like, sure I wouldn't mind if my girlfriend won the lottery; who turns down a big house with all the fixings?

Yet, here he is.

And he knows how to live here. The week alone gave him time to accustom himself to wandering the place. He showed the dogs where they do and do not belong. They are now all on their best behavior. Zeke freaked out and threw up a couple times, but he also might have eaten something in the yard he wasn't supposed to.

They're living. They're adjusting.

But, now? This is it.

Will has had roommates. And he lived with a girlfriend for eight months, once, though they had to finish up the year of rent seeing other people when they realized it wasn't gonna work out.

He can go back to Wolf Trap if this doesn't work - this thing between him and Hannibal. But, really, despite the worry and the strain of discomfort running through him, he feels like this is.

Right.
Like this is *it*.

And that's kind of too good to be true. He doesn't want to trust it but, separately, there might not be anyone alive he trusts more than Hannibal. The man who saw him kill a man, saw him try to kill another, and dropped to his knees with a knife to help, that second time.

The situation is strange, but Hannibal *fits him* in the weirdest fucking way.

It's like they would work out even if they weren't going to live together. Shit, that might have been better - Hannibal might have been forced to come 'round his way more often. Forced to acclimate to the dogs.

He's like seriously happy for Hannibal to be able to break the kitchen in. But he's also been oddly bereft without him to sleep with. He wants that, now. He was ready for it and it kinda threw his whole system off when he woke up each morning on the couch and Hannibal wasn't already there, quietly pacing his space.

Will slept alone, on the couch, the dogs warm and scattered in front of him.

And now Hannibal's here and Will wants to kick the fucking movers out and lock the doors and be handled.

His shoulders are up around his ears and he knows he has several hours more until they can go to sleep. He just wants to be held and for the world to consist of just the two of them for a while.

This sustained state of anxiety is annoying as hell.

He hears a metal ramp hit the road out front and Emma loses it again. Chester has to be shooed out of the bonsai pots so he won't dig.

Will sighs and plants. Gets his hands dirty. The dogs scramble over him. Seemingly unconvinced with Will's quiet industry and busy hands, Winston whines, then wanders away, out of the yard. Will isn't too concerned. He wouldn't run for it.

Will gets Zeke to stop trying to eat the seeds. And Jessie to stop attacking Zeke's tail.

A shadow falls on him when Winston trots back. With someone behind him.

He led Hannibal there.

Hannibal crouches to come close. He casts an appraising eye on the work so far and grips the edge of a long, clean planter. "Winston came to retrieve me."

Will glares at Winston. "Tattletale."

The tattletale just steps to Will's other side and curls against his leg where he kneels.

Okay. It really is kinda nice that Winston knew to go get the big, stable one for the cowering, fragile one.

Hannibal moves to squat near him. He picks Jessie up in one handful and removes her from Zeke's tail.

Will laughs because it's the most assertive he's been with the dogs yet.

He reaches to scratch Winston's head. "Thank you," Hannibal says to him. "My mate only tells me
when he's in distress half the time. It's nice to know I can count on you, Winston."

"I'm not in distress," he grumbles.

"You found yourself quite suddenly in the middle of noise, activity, and strangers after a week alone." He curves a hand down around Will's forearm and squeezes. "You also haven't had physical access to me in that week. And I calm you."

That's not ego - that's reality. It's really, very true.

He can't look at Hannibal's eyes as he unsticks words from beneath his ribs. "I missed you. I guess I... just wanna skip this part," he sighs.

Hannibal stops his hands, then tugs a bit at his neck, so Will sighs and sits back.

Hannibal draws Will's head to rest at his neck.

"These men will be gone in two hours. I have an interior decorator scheduled to assist me Thursday. The lighting and some more of the fixtures must be made to suit the new décor. No other strangers after that. I promise. Just you and I forming our environment until we're quite comfortable." Will likes the feeling of Hannibal's hand hooked around his neck, keeping him close. "What did you do for meals, my dear?"

The endearment gives him goosebumps. The words warm his blood. "I got some things from town. Ordered online and just picked them up on my way home from getting, you know. Supplies and whatever. God, I missed you," he repeats, "I want-"

He wants. He wants for Hannibal to guide his hands in the kitchen. For him to make beautiful plates and hand him warm bowls. To share wine and stop talking about people they know and the news and their own past. He wants Hannibal to teach him history with every mouthful. Chemistry in pots and physics in pans. Will wants him to keep talking and to laugh at his own jokes and to share his cleverness and make Will feel like he has a special seat at the table, a view no one else will share.

He closes his eyes and presses under Hannibal's chin.

What if Will just gets to start life over? Without always being surrounded by people who don't understand. With someone who doesn't like when he lets himself get overwhelmed. With someone who wants him to wake up to himself, each day. Not ghosts and evidence files and bodies and behavior patterns. What if he was just Will and he just belonged to Hannibal and not anybody else?

He wants so much right now. So he only repeats, "I missed you."

"You need me," Hannibal presses.

Yeah, Will can give him that. He nods. Presses soil into his jacket gripping his strong arm.

"I have something I can prepare for our lunch."

"It's busy in there."

"I had them unload the kitchen, first. We can unpack it later. I'll begin and use whatever tools I can find first to cook for us."
"I really hoped your first time in the kitchen you could do something extravagant like you want." He thinks he feels that need from Hannibal, singing in his veins. Wants it for him so much.

"I knew things would be busy. I have some items in a cooler, pre-cut and ready. Out in the car."

"Ugh," Will slumps against him. "I knew it. I knew it. How are you always ready for everything? I prepare myself for shit all the time but I'm not... ready for every eventuality like you are," he sounds pathetic. Intentionally.

Hannibal's thumb sweeps his neck, soothing. "I enjoy the unexpected. And I must anticipate the needs of my partner. He's a man of variety and contradictions. I find intrigue in his complexities."

Who fucking says that? Honestly.

Will moves to stand and Hannibal does, too. Kisses him and comes close and staring. Will tries to avoid it but Hannibal calls his name softly. He has to learn to get used to this.

Hannibal's eyes tell him more than other people. This time they tell him that all this is the truth. He wants Will. Will wants him. And it feels good to be needed by one another.

Will is learning that he is allowed to need Hannibal this much. He is appreciated the same if he feels stable or unstable. Teacup or mongoose.

"Winston may come in while we unpack."

Holy shit. "Seriously?"

"He may," Hannibal nods. "I trust that he will behave."

Well. Maybe they'll find out. Winston responds well to Will's stress. He'll probably be sitting on Will's foot while he unwraps the dishes and flatware and whatever. Calm and careful.

"But right now you're-"

"They must finish with the second truck. We'll have much to unpack after the boxes have all come in. Did you find the stream yet? The river?"

He shakes his head. "Been busy."

"Go tire the pack out and by the time you come back, I'll have started."

"'Kay. You sure?"

Hannibal kisses him. "I adore you, my dear boy." He doesn't have to tell Will to be careful. The hands cherishing him are as good as a threat. He better be careful because Hannibal missed him, too.

That touch of rage Will saw when Hannibal could no longer contain his frustration with Jack would make a reappearance if it had to.

He remembers that, navigating the woods a while later.

How angry Hannibal was at Jack for hurting Will. How Hannibal boxed his own impatience and irritation up inside all his manners while, under his suits, he carried those muscular arms. Will feels like Hannibal, both with his psychiatric education and knowledge of anatomy, could really, pointedly hurt someone if he let himself.
But he's a good man. And he has control.

When he doesn't have control, Will sees it.

He might... he might be the only one who does see it. Anyone else seemed to always assume Hannibal was just a nice, happy guy. Neutral and flexible. Helpful.

If Will is the only one Hannibal loses control around, maybe that makes him Hannibal's......

Owner.

In a way.

In the same way that Hannibal can't help but take ownership of Will's preservation when reality slips through his fingers.

If he's the only person who can bring Hannibal's impatience out, the only one who drives Hannibal to express anger at others - maybe Will holds a kind of control over him.

It's. Well.

It's kinda sexy in a dark way.

It makes him wanna push it a little.

Not in any really unhealthy way. But if he wants Hannibal to cancel his appointments and stay home and fuck him, maybe he can try his luck someday.

With his charm, his social capital, his intellect and experience, if he looks at it this way, Will has a very bright, beautiful partner who might-

Hmm. He might be a lover people envy Will for.

It hasn't escaped his notice, how lucky he is. Like, Hannibal's obviously really fucking rich.

Will Graham, son of a working man, whirls of his fingerprints permanently darkened from building and fixing things all his life, an intellectual boogeyman, a physical shrimp, a social reject -- he just netted the east coast's most eligible bachelor without even trying.

Considering he did so, for the most part, while he was out of his mind exploring the histories of murders and the depths of physical and mental illness, he either did something else very right, or he simply found the person he was meant to connect with, above all others.

He flirts. It's what he does. And he empathizes. It's what he does.

But some fucking combination of those things must have worked on Hannibal in just the right amount for him to simply expect Will in his bed for the foreseeable future.

He finds the stream. The dogs are excited and he's thrilled with them. Running and jumping and egging them on.

And when he gets back home, he's thrilled at that, too. He sees his lone rocking chair on the brick path out back and he remembers what's missing out here. What Beverly pointed out.

Inside, he kicks off his shoes and heads to the kitchen. He can still hear the trucks idling out on the road but the front door is locked. No hand trucks in the large entryway, just boxes. They're leaving
and taking their noise with them. He goes to the kitchen and scrubs his hands clean and moves around the counter to offer them to Hannibal.

He puts his knife down to curve one of Will's hands over his own. Brings it to his lips and kisses it. Hands him the complicated corkscrew for the wine because he has to figure it out someday.

"Do we grill?"

Hannibal considers this. "Most of what's done on a grill can be accomplished with far more accuracy in the kitchen."

"Well, do we eat outside?"

"In the right conditions."

"Do we host garden parties?"

"I certainly hope not," he smiles.

Will grins. "We don't have a deck."

"Mm," Hannibal nods. "I had wondered why the backyard looked so incomplete."

"So had I."

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Lunch is simple, bringing a chilled broth back to life and ratcheting the flavor back up to taste as it's heated. A chilled dough is pushed out flat and Will helps top it with herbs, tomatoes, cheeses.

"We'll start a new bread dough when we're done eating," Hannibal says. "I need to locate the honey. The sooner we begin making bread from scratch, the sooner the proper bacteria will take residence with us."

"Still sounds... kinda gross."

"No. Perfectly healthy," he continues as he dries his hands to pull plates down and warm them.

"Much as the cured meats do, bread needs friendly bacteria for yeast to truly do its job and flavor our loaves well. The more familiar we become with this house, the better our food will taste."

"What if the previous owners made bread?"

"We can hope they did. There might already be the proper environment for our yeast. But it's not likely. In any case, they would not have had the exact grains and yeast we'll be working with."

"You have your own bacterial friends. Ones you prefer," he grins.

Hannibal smiles back at him. "I only keep the most refined company," he points to Will's shirt and looks down to see a squirt of seeds and tomato juice down his front.

"Wow. Clearly."

So it's not the fancy affair Will was waiting for, but Hannibal is Hannibal so it's still a delicious meal with delicately, thin-sliced meat and a beautifully poached egg and bright greens.

They eat at the new dining table. It's not like Chinese take-out on the floor - like every other
housewarming the average couple has when moving in. It's good that he got the next-best thing with Beverly. There are still boxes surrounding them and the light isn't right. That's typical of a move-in day. The rest of it is so uniquely them. They talk. They envision how the room will look when it's finished. Plan on installing and assembling things.

Mostly, they're at peace together. He starts to realize that Hannibal makes him laugh so he can stare at him. He never misses it. He looks directly at Will when delivering those dry punchlines but Will falls for it every time.

He's flushed from the wine and too lazy to want to work. He draws Hannibal's hand close, when they're just talking over empty dishes. Hannibal tells him how he was sad to move away from a bigger city with some art and fashion, but that the independent spirit is stronger here and he wants to be with Will while they strike out on less conventional adventures.

"Both of us have places we are decidedly comfortable. But, in living here, together with you, I know I'll experience something outside of my range of everyday knowledge."

Will thinks about this. "I know you probably just mean 'living with pets and sharing closet space,' but I just remembered that this is also the first day of living together." Aside from sleeping in Hannibal's guest room on occasion, there was no overlap in their time, before. Will went directly from Virginia to Maine. Hannibal just finalized all his business in Baltimore late last night. "So you're talking, like, how I can't manage to sleep past 9 on any given morning. And I use every little scrap of my soap until I step into the shower one morning and forget I'm out. And how green bell peppers give me gas."

Hannibal blinks at him. And Will realizes: "Oh. This is seriously the first time you've moved in with somebody?"

"I understand all the impolite details will come out," he shakes his head. "You had never told me any foods gave you discomfort. This is the kind of thing I need to know, Will."

"Ah. Well, if you leave the door open when you take a leak? That's the kind of thing I need to know. That's always weirded me out."

Hannibal appraises him for a moment. "You don't cover your mouth when you yawn. I was letting it slide."

Will laughs. "No, see, no. I know you have this thing about manners so if shit like that comes up, we should have it on the table, we can't just suffer in silence. Your whole politesse thing-"

"Is nowhere near the priorities of your noise level endurance and your comfort level with respect to visitors," he speaks as if it's unquestionable. "I am comfortable when decorum is maintained, yes, but I don't have an accompanying condition that propels me away from a room when restraint is not observed. You may need to step away from a dinner party once every hour to endure the chatter and proximity for more than 45 minutes. That's understandable. That concerns me. I was an ER surgeon, Will. I've had to remove quizzical objects from many an unflattering place. I know how the human body works. It's your mind I must take pains to accommodate for."

He must not respond for a while because Hannibal draws Will's right hand into both of his own to rub it and kiss a knuckle. He observes Will in the quiet while he tries to say-

Tries to figure out how to convey-

"Okay. I've uh." He swallows. "I've had this... I just wanted you to come here and I was working on
the yard -- the whole time I was working on the yard, I'd just try to focus on the next steps and what I'd do with your next furniture delivery and how I remembered you stacking things in your fridge so I wouldn't fuck it up. And I made sure to order meals so I wouldn't cook in your kitchen before you got here. And I didn't sleep in the bed because maybe it felt unreal that I was actually invited to.

Because-- because I was also thinking - and trying not to think - about how you're so... I donno. Elegant. And I'm a," he motions at himself. "And I'm a. A- just some jerk who-

Hannibal stands. He has Will stand and gives up his hand to come closer. He moves from the corner of the table to Will's side. He takes Will's hips in his hands and steps closer, pressed against him.

"Will."

"I get it. I do."

"I doubt that. Will. I am prepared to begin a new phase of life. I want to share it with you. And I want you to understand that you weren't simply invited as a guest." He touches Will's face, his fingers light on his cheeks and into his scruff. "You treated Will Graham as a guest in my home. Don't ever do it again. He is my partner. This is no ordinary affair. You belong wherever I want you to be."

It wasn't really possible to think of this place as home. Certainly not without Hannibal and not while he had left his property in Virginia locked up tight.

He figured.

He really did kind of figure he'd be back in short order. Like the first time he woke up and tried to kiss Hannibal with rank morning breath, he would balk and realize Will wasn't his type.

Like, he literally thought it would be some small thing or just his parade of personality defects. And Hannibal would realize he was nuts to think that this was a good idea.

Will is a bearded nobody in a lighthouse.

Hannibal is out on the wave, pleasure cruising in a yacht.

Except.

Well. Will knows he's really not.

Refinements might be Hannibal's thing, but Jack was a political and cultural climber at the FBI. A domineering force whom Hannibal wasn't afraid to say no to, no matter how much Jack proved himself a ruthless intellect.

He defied Alana's directives with respect to Abigail because he wanted more for her than just her health - more than the polite bounds of clinical care would allow him to provide for her. He was an aid to her in times of trouble. He showed her mercy and welcomed her to his table like any of the adults.

He's got dogs in his yard, now. The minute he stripped Will of his clothes for the first time, Hannibal was fully aware of whatever Will was hiding physically - and long aware of the things he hid, mentally.

If he wasn't up for change or a challenge or some damn variety in his life, he wouldn't have put in an offer on a multi-million dollar home and then turned to the ragged-ass unemployed ex-special-agent standing beside him to say, I see you here with me. I know your history, your illnesses, your instability and I want you to sweat in my sheets until we figure out how to banish your nightmares.
That's exactly what he meant. That's what this has been.

And now the key in Will's coat pocket calls to him like a buoy pinging on the waves. It's his house in Wolf Trap, ready to accept its owner back and-

He feels guilty.

Will is home here. He turns to kiss Hannibal's palm and he tries to crush the feeling that it's a betrayal - because, how can he want Hannibal to keep him and put him to bed and help him with his damaged brain, but he has that escape route-

That key in his pocket. Pointing south if he should find himself in deep waters.

"I didn't sell the house," he confesses, his voice strained.

"I know. It's smart to be cautious. We are quite new."

"I don't want to run the first time I feel like I'm fucking up your spotless existence."

"I am not spotless. And I don't want a spotless partner. I want this silly man who would sleep on a couch to match my manners. You give me too much credit. Enough. We are both intelligent enough to know exactly who we are with."

"I haven't told you everything."

"Neither have I. Good, then, we are neither of us afraid of surprises." He wraps Will up in his arms and kisses his head. Inhales in his hair. "You smell of work. The woods. Our kitchen. Exertion. Undress and lay down on our bed so I may illustrate precisely how I enjoy you exactly as you are. So I may touch you and seek forgiveness for leaving you so alone over the past weeks."

Will holds him, too. He wants to balk. Reject neediness, weakness, dependence, insecurity.

But he's been piling stones on top of himself his whole life to hide those things. To station a light at the highest point and throw a clear, critical beam down on everyone else.

Hannibal lives with him. He knows what Will has to hide and doesn't want him to anymore.

So he pulls Hannibal down and takes his mouth the way he wants to. Then lets Hannibal clear the dining room on his own, without protest.

He goes to do as he's told.

Hannibal praises him when he comes upstairs to take him hard. He uses Will up fast and keeps fucking him until he's sleepy and shivering. Then he pulls Will under the warm covers and keeps going. He could drop off with Hannibal still inside him so he rolls away and has Hannibal kneel over him. Strokes him in a rhythm he wouldn't keep for himself. Surprises him, as his breathy, punched-out orgasm proves.

He likes to fill Will up and then keep making a mess of him. He likes to get them both covered and sweaty and run his fingers over them both, then diligently clean Will up exactly where he lies. He'll rinse off and come back and soothe a warm washcloth over Will's used body, test the love bites he's left imprinted on Will's skin. Then brush his hair aside and cradle him close to sleep.

This time he leaves, sometime during Will's nap. He is in slacks and no shirt and no socks and he's hanging things in the closet.
Will pulls on his boxers and goes to the bathroom. Comes out yawning.

Tries to remember to cover his mouth.

Will didn't really unload his boxes because he wasn't sure where everything would go. Or if it was right to put himself in Hannibal's space.

Hannibal proves that it is, now. He's dragged one of the deliveries into the bedroom. It's a box of fucking cedar wood clothes hangers.

He's hanging Will's stuff.

"I threw up on that shirt junior year of college. Pretty sure you got that maroon suit a month ago and it cost more than my car is worth," he points deeper in the closet where the majority of Hannibal's jackets already hang.

Hannibal's hands pause only a brief moment. So short it could be either disbelief he decided to shake off or just the amount of time it took him to translate after an hour of silence. "I must confess that I would like to see you in simpler patterns. Closer fits. But I'm also conscious that my lover still fits in the clothes he wore as an undergraduate student. Not even I could say that for myself."

"Well, yeah, but now I know that's because you bulked out. And don't speak too soon, if you keep feeding me and you," he blows out a breath, leans in the doorway, "encourage my nesting, who knows how big I'll get."

"Good, then, that I always appreciate a creature with some meat on the bone," he finishes straightening the last set he hung up and pushes them aside, comes to lean down and span his hand over Will's stomach and grins into kissing him.

"Getting the distinct feeling that's somehow more of a threat than a joke?"

"How astute you are. Go back to sleep, my dear."

Will yawns again. "No, no. I can hang my own stuff up."

"I would prefer to. Unpack our bathroom boxes. Are we to choose sinks?"

"I mean. If you want," he shrugs.

"Make your pick first."

He starts to protest. He's not the guy who pays the bills.

"Please," Hannibal interrupts him to insist. "You choose first. And begin unpacking. Once we're comfortable in here we can begin on the kitchen. We'll open the back door and let Winston 'help' us."

Will goes warm at the idea. "Okay." He touches the crease of a scar on Hannibal's side.

He holds still and lets Will's fingers wander.

"Can I ask for. Something. Like. Something I want?"

"I would be willing to discuss anything. As always."

Will takes a deep breath. "Can you make coffee for us?"
"Of course," he waits, though, knowing more is coming.

Another deep breath. He didn't know he needed this until now. "Can we sit down, later? In the office. And, um. Talk."

Hannibal straightens up just a little, subtly. "Of course."

"I haven't been reading the news. And. That can't go on forever. I can't just ignore the world outside."

Hannibal weighs his words. "You do need to protect yourself. But cutting oneself off from reality obviously will not work. Will. We can find a psychiatrist in town who."

"I don't," he shakes his head, "I don't want another therapist. I know how it works for regular--" he stops. "You know me better. You don't stay in the safe zones and you know when I can handle that. I can't- it's not therapy with you. I just need to be." He shrugs. He doesn't even know.

"You need to have your truths pulled forward on occasion," he says. Which is maybe the kindest way to put it.

He needs to face what he's done. And what he's doing, now, in stepping away, knowing that he could be killing people by not lifting a finger to stop cruelty. Knowing that people do, in fact, lose their lives when the right minds aren't out there chasing killers.

"I also kinda need you to tell me I'm not an asshole."

Hannibal shifts. Considers him. "It terrifies me how close you were to the Chesapeake Ripper that night," he confesses, holding him a bit tighter. "Looking back, the fever that drove you away from Jack's side also saved your life. An illness did that. Otherwise you were so out of touch with your surroundings, I fear you may not even have known what that monster was doing to you. Your deepest instincts drove you to me, instead. You are not unwanted or unwelcomed. You are a relief. I almost feel as if I did something so right that it pulled you out of the fire, the same way you rescued Abigail from her fate. No, Will. You are not an asshole. You are my treasure. It is hard not to take credit for you," he smiles a little and Will can laugh. "I will tell you, any time you have need of hearing it, that this is your home. That you belong here," he cups Will's head.

That touch is an illustration. Hannibal knows he is Will's real home. He is welcome in this house. But he is home with this man.

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Dinner is fancier.

It's three courses and appropriately-paired beers. "To make good on my promise," Hannibal says. Sex. And beer.

"I don't know what I was doing with my life before this. You're officially my favorite person in the world."

Hannibal smiles so wide. "Likewise, my friend." He raises his beer glass and they toast to their new house.

Winston carried empty boxes down the main hall when they were done with them. He helped. Pleased as Hannibal was by it, he drew the line at the dogs being involved with meals. For that
matter, they both also showered after unpacking the kitchen and before cooking. Hannibal is sensitive to smells and just doesn’t want to taint the food with them. He doesn’t say it that way (too polite to) but he did go on and on about how absorbent their fluffy new loaf of bread was.

He doesn’t need to say anything, really. He’s gonna be enduring Will's nightly fear sweats so he gets a pass on his aversion to dogs. Will sincerely does understand that they're not for everyone. And Hannibal is trying hard to like them.

Will's cheeks glow warm after the beers and the fine food. Hannibal stationed him over a pot to monitor it and stir. Much as he wants to start getting more involved in preparation, he thought it was important for Hannibal to enjoy the first dinner without too many questions or Will's little imperfections.

Hannibal drove up all morning. He supervised the movers. He made lunch. Fucked Will to sleep. And they both completely unpacked two rooms, arranging them to perfection.

Now, this.

He works so hard. He handles Will's unbalanced insecurities and... what could reasonably be called self-centeredness.

Hannibal simply attributes it to Will's empathy disorder and stress and anxiety and recent history. So much so that it feels untrue. He feels like he does nothing but take.

They move the dishes into the kitchen and leave them for now. That's not a first for Hannibal, but it does seem rare.

They take their beers upstairs to their bedroom.

Their bedroom.

And sit in the plush, new chairs nursing their glasses, watching the sunset, framed just to the side in the wide, west-facing window.

He looks over Hannibal's still form, poised but easy in the chair, one leg crossed over the other knee. Breathing easy and appreciating his surroundings. The sights. The smells. The novelty. The taste of the beer.

Will feels that tightness behind his ribs. Loving him. And everything he's just given to Will. Hannibal is elegant and refined. He is here and Will needs him more the more he has him.

Will is still unstable and his teammate is stability itself. This is unexpected and he respects Alana and her memory enough to sit there for a long moment and thank her for not letting him fake it.

If he had faked it, he would have gotten sicker and would have hid it more. He would have tried to prove himself stable and it might have been her home he stumbled off to that night, waving his gun.

With a toss, Will polishes off his beer. Still cool in his mouth, even after the sun has long left them, and simply refreshing after a week of building, cleaning, moving, unpacking.

Worrying.

Hannibal is home, now. He came home to make this thing between them a long-lasting reality.

He came home to Will. It felt like a dream that a reality this warm and luxurious should belong to
him. This is proof that it does.

So Will rises and comes to Hannibal's chair. He takes Hannibal's glass from his fingers and sets it on the small table between the plush seats.

Climbs in, straddling Hannibal to kiss him and then hold Hannibal's head to his belly, fingers in his hair.

Hands come up Will's backside, down again to his thighs to pull him closer. He lets himself be positioned, then settles atop Hannibal and holds him tighter.

It's reciprocated. Hannibal's arms go far around him, hands reaching, then clamping his fingers in Will's sides hard enough to bruise.

"Forgive me, Will, but I don't think I can let you keep yourself tonight. I think you're mine and I will do with you exactly as I please."

"Mm." He isn't actually telling Will he has no choice here, but Will can decide to agree. So he just kisses Hannibal. Sinks against him. Hannibal's hands push up his back, under his shirt, kneading and firm.

"My Will. My beautiful Will. If I had my way, you wouldn't move anything except your fine, narrow hips until the entire house is complete. Until I find it fitting enough for you and the lights flattering for these eyes."

"Museum-quality? Put me on display?" he shivers, starts shifting his hips on Hannibal's lap. He thinks of the flower arrangements on Hannibal's tables and sideboards. The way the paintings would sit under perfect light in his house in Baltimore. Thinks about Hannibal spreading him out on their dining table, Hannibal in front of him lowering his mouth on Will's cock with the sun rising behind him. Not letting him up for breakfast until he's set the plates around his body. Feeds him from them and drinks from Will like he were a vessel.

"Gorgeous," Hannibal agrees. "Galatea, breathing in the bed I've laid for you. I would bathe you, clean you, shave you, dry your skin to a fine, faint pink. Flushed and waiting for me. Dressed only in the warm sheets I leave for you." His hands run down to palm Will's ass and he rides up against him just enough.

For Will to rattle. Gasp.

His vision is both holy and dirty. Pristine and possessive.

Something in Will wants to push him to do it. Give himself over.

This isn't talking. This isn't that strange half-therapy he wanted.

Somehow it's better.

Better knowing that Hannibal is getting something in return, in spite of Will's doubts. Because, apparently, he genuinely lusts for Will.

It raises so many questions. Really fucking good questions.

"Say I ask you things I wanna know. Things you maybe haven't wanted to talk about. And. When you do tell me, I say you can... you know..." he shrugs, turns slow eyes down on Hannibal and hears him lose control of his breath for the first time.
Wow. Turns out Will knows how to be *tempting*.

Hannibal holds him close, opens his mouth wide against Will's throat. Breathes him in.

Pulls back slowly, sucking a kiss. "Ask," he agrees.

Will rolls on his lap for a moment and closes his eyes, turns to let Hannibal and his hungry mouth have full access to his throat.

"Did you want me? When you first saw me? When did this start?"

He kisses Will's throat again. Firmly. "May I? Please?"

Will knows what that means. "Answer first."

"I've wanted to be inside you from the moment we sat in your hotel for breakfast and your laugh bloomed in the air right before me."

"Oh god," he gasps, bearing his hips forward, trying for friction that just isn't close enough.

Hannibal sinks his teeth into Will's throat, high on the side and *tasting* like Will was a peach dripping around his lips.

"Hannibal," he grips Hannibal's soft house coat, wanting him to rip it off and present himself. "Fuck."

He doesn't relent. His bite goes harder. Harder. He sucks at Will's skin.

"Fuck," he breathes.

He lets it keep happening until it hurts like it may bleed. He taps out on Hannibal's shoulder and he immediately relents.

Will gasps.

One hand lets go of Will. He reaches up to appreciate his work. Pads of his fingers warm and soothing.

"Was that - I mean. Are you serious about that?" Will wonders aloud.

"Give me these things and I will be truthful with you. I want you in every way you may allow. And some I know you won't."

Holy fuck.

Will's gonna have a filthy, dirty, mind-bending, covetous, sexually-charged relationship with his mild-mannered, too-polite boyfriend. "It's literally always the quiet ones," he marvels.

Hannibal laughs a little.

"Um. My um. Jeans are starting to-"

Hannibal pulls him snug so he can keep his balance. Reaches down to unzip his jeans and pull them open. The pressure eases a little with him only tenting his boxers.

He reaches up, then, around Will's waist, under his shirt. Kneads at his skin and Will's focus falls, on
accident, from Hannibal's strong hands and wrists, trips up to his eyes.

"I know what I want next. Do you?"

"Um. Maybe. Kinda concerned now that I might need to veto something if-

"My intention isn't to do you irreparable harm. I quite like you whole and healthy. If you were mortified by a notion, of course, we would not ever revisit it."

Geeze. "Well, don't write me off entirely. Maybe I would grow to like it."

Hannibal clearly tries not to give him a dubious look.

Well, okay then. "You go first this time."

"I wish to see what's under this," he moves one hand to thumb at Will's chin, indicating his facial hair. "And I want to do it myself."

"An... eighteen-year-old kid is under this, trust me," he can't help but grin.

"Sometime before we go into society for the spring. With ample time for you to grow back a comfortable beard if you should desire it."

"Seriously, you're gonna be the one desiring. 'Society' is gonna call you a cradle-robber otherwise. I know how this works. I've been hiding it for some modicum of professional respect for years." Will's stomach gives a nervous flutter.

Society.

Hannibal reads it on him. "Say yes. And don't worry yourself. You will look beautiful on my arm."

Fuck. "Fine. I want to know how you've been handling what happened with Gideon. And with Budge."

Hannibal softens, puts both hands to his face. "Do not concern yourself with those thoughts."

"I am concerned," he tugs on Hannibal's coat. "I need my teammate to tell me. You help me all the time. Is it because you don't want me in your head?"

"It's far too late for that. I fear you've only left your comfort zone so far behind, so immediately, because we started spending more time together."

The implication being that Will only went for this because he empathized too deeply with Hannibal.

Not because he just wants him that much.

Will shakes his head. Presses a fierce kiss to him. "You didn't just rub off on me. Sure, maybe I'm borrowing some of your sanity, but you've also been propping me up and helping me make decisions that saved my life. You're my home," he insists fiercely. "This is home. And it's more. L-love? Devotion? You don't need to say what it is. But all these... unbelievable ways you want me to belong to you? I don't always get why you want this from me, but I'm ready, Hannibal. I'm ready to give myself back to you. You've been reaching out to me for months - since the start. I thought I was fine without you," he scoffs. "I mean. Sure. I could survive on my own. Having this, though?" he cards Hannibal's hair into its proper place again. "You're great with me. You're great for me. I have another question."
Hannibal fists a hand in his shirt to pull him down and bite at his lips. "You'll let me dress you. At least allow me to have a proper fitting done and if you're too uncomfortable, I won't request it again."

He really is gonna pretty Will up until he's a properly-kept lover. It's got an escape clause attached, so it's easy for Will to agree with a firm nod.

"When I came to your house. The night you took me to the ER. Did I put that gun in your face?"

Hannibal soothes hands over his throat. Hesitating.

"Please just tell me."

"Your temperature was 105 that night. Did you know that?"

"Hannibal."

"You were deeply disturbed by everything you'd witnessed and the illness only amplified."

"I did," he realizes. It's exactly like he thought. "I was coming to you for safe harbor and I still-"

"You hallucinated that Garret Jacob Hobbes had found you. You were attempting to 'show' me he was there. You were terrified and the illness made it feel real."

He grabs Hannibal's jacket in both hands. "I'm sorry. No one should ever have their partner threaten them."

"We weren't yet together, Will."

"You were still my teammate. I didn't know how much more was possible. I didn't know. I almost didn't have this. Do you know how much that hurts? That I almost took this away from myself who-knows-how-many times? I had no idea. Hannibal, I had no idea."

They're too quiet for a long moment. Maybe he just revealed that he's already committed too much of his heart to this and Hannibal's gonna freak. Maybe this was meant to be sexy and convenient and a kind of recovery trip after all the death they experienced. Maybe Hannibal meant for them to just feel alive with each other for a while.

He could say, 'fuck me,' and ignore it for now. Brush this give-and-take to the side; pretend he didn't just give all of himself away. Pretend he didn't just tacitly agree to all of what Hannibal wants, no matter what. Questions and answers or no.

Instead, if this is a real opportunity to feel good forever, he's too desperate for it.

That's what this is all about. He feels too much and he feels this devotion from Hannibal, this desire, and his head, this way Will absorbs from everyone and can't protect himself from their feelings -- he just finally (finally, finally) wants that to be a good thing. A thing for himself. A benefit and a blessing and not just a fucking disorder.

Hannibal doesn't make him feel broken.

Hannibal Lecter makes him feel powerful and makes him feel beautiful.

The sheer volume of want he's been trying to temper a reaction to is really there.

Hannibal really wants him that way.
Can't this flaw in his personal evolution finally benefit Will, personally? Can't he be with his fucking partner, his lover, and feel the way Family is supposed to radiate?

Instead of being a tool to save lives he'll barely ever get to touch.

Instead of just being some kind of asshole-radar who trips over serial killers.

He doesn't always feel strong, so he fakes it a lot. Until it doesn't matter and he just does what's necessary to survive. Maybe, when he doesn't feel strong, he wants to turn to his partner and hear the reasons why he is strong, in a sane and trusted voice.

That's what he must have done in the fever. It must be why he walked home with that gun and that ghost. To be told he wasn't really going completely insane.

He would have been left alone on his island by anyone else. Jack was watching his shore wash into the sea night by night. Beverly was trying to add him to the maps in some small way. Alana was only there to care for the local fauna.

Hannibal finds shade and fruit in him. Finds home, just like Will does, in Hannibal.

"No," Hannibal finally answers. He's squinting, assessing. Seeing deep within Will. "I would have given you this somehow. You would not have missed it."

"I would have if I wasn't home with you the morning Gideon showed up. God, Hannibal. If you had been alone."

"If I didn't have my teammate. I might not have made it out so easily," he quietly agrees. He nods. He considers. "You have spared me the pain of waiting, as well. It was no small effort to agree to step back from the FBI. Jack was a formidable figure in your life."

"He didn't care about you after Budge. Which is why I have to. I have to know that you're okay," Will insists. "You have to talk to me. I talk to you. You have to talk to me."

"Alright." He pulls Will's grip from his coat and repeats, "Alright." He takes a deep breath. "Perhaps we need to unpack the office next. Perhaps we should speak as we once did."

"Not now. Okay? Now you can touch me."

He puts his hands around Will's wrists, as good as shackled in his grip. "How may I touch you?"

"That depends what you need. You gave me a lot of what I need today. Let me give back to you. This has gotta be even. We're partners."

He frowns a little. "Not necessarily even. This implies a quid pro quo we may not always be able to maintain. We must explore the acceptable limitations of unbalanced benefits. We are not alike. We do not share a background, upbringing, or even age. Let us be individuals of differing tastes. If you were not so different, after all, I would not find you so alluring."

"If you weren't so different, we'd still be pacing around your office in Baltimore. Or- no. I'd be voluntarily committed. And you'd still be looking at ugly condos in Boston."

"Let us never speak of Boston again," he grins. "My skin crawls at the thought of any home which is not this one."

Will can smile, too. Can lean down and rest against Hannibal's shoulder, still lazily half-hard and
kind of dizzyingly in love at this strange tipping point.

"I was pleasantly surprised by how quickly you brought me to climax by hand this afternoon. An unfair advantage," he gently pretends to chastise. "I have yet to take a proper look at you, flushed and coming. So," he lets go Will's wrists and helps him off. Pulls him across the room to the bed. Turns on the overhead light and strips his shirt. "Will. Remove the rest of your clothing and show yourself to me. Show me what you enjoy. How to treat you."

"Hm. Don't, um. Exactly like being.... all, like. Splayed out and on show. You know?"

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. Begins unbuttoning his own shirt and circles the rooms to draw the curtains. On his way back, he snags his beer, still half-full. Hands it over.

"Beer and sex. I provide the intoxicants, you provide the show."

It's easier than that, really. He salutes Hannibal with the glass and chugs the last of it. But Hannibal also kisses the taste from his lips until he's clawing and ready. And when Hannibal asks, "Will you show me how to touch your chest?" it sounds as even and studious as "Will you show me how you open yourself?" and, eventually, "Will you come for me now? Will you come calling me to you? Will you come home to me?"

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They continue to unpack the house together, but take time apart when they're down to the last two areas: the garage and the basement.

Three cars could fit in the garage and they've only got Will's junker and the Bentley. Will crams his fishing gear and tools into one corner of the garage and is prepared to call it a day until Hannibal comes out to check on him with a warm mug of coffee and gives him a strange look.

"You usually take better care with your flies and rods," he sounds concerned which is touching in a ridiculous way.

"Well. Didn't want to do anything too. You know. Um. Obsessive in here," he accepts the mug and chugs it because he had no idea he was out here so long in the first place. He didn't skip time.

He was just trying really hard to be very unobtrusive.

Hannibal keeps looking at him oddly. "We could go out to the port and purchase the proper fixtures. You could use a stool and a bench for-"

"I don't really need to."

They're silent for a moment. Hannibal takes the mug back. "I've had new ventilation installed downstairs so that I can properly cure meats."

Well, yeah, Will knows this. He let the HVAC guys in. They left his receipt after installing the last fan. The bill was... pretty big.

"How are you to instruct Abigail if you don't have even the basic proper equipment?"

"I'm not. I mean. That was... it really is a bad idea. I was thinking, maybe? Instead? She could teach me how to hunt. That way it's more like the parts of her father that she chooses can live on through her. I mean," he shrugs, "I thought I'd offer."
Hannibal considers this and Will can already tell it sounds like a seriously bad idea to him, but he's trying not to show it. "Perhaps."

"Christ."

"We could ask if that interests her. Though, I should be the one to ask. After all, she would have to agree to go into the woods. With you behind her. Armed."

He closes his eyes. "Fuck." That really is a bad idea. "Oh my god, I'm an idiot."

"No." He doesn't budge on that point at all. "You're trying. Perhaps you might consider another, entirely different activity you both might learn together, instead."

Will's at a total loss.

Hannibal slowly comes forward to hook his neck and skim his thumb there. "We shall think of something. For now? Let me finish my inventory of the wine and then we will go into town to find suitable vendors for some of my needs in the basement. We will retrieve better equipment for this area of the garage, as well. Please, Will - stop attempting to fit into the smallest possible space."

He goes warm. They haven't been seen out in town together, yet. Yeah, Portland is large and unknown to them, and it won't mean anything to anyone they come across, but this will be their first time... really the first time besides house-hunting when they'll be seen as a pair.

"Why are the dogs still in the back yard?"

"Um. What?"

He gives Will another look.

Yeah. It's not like Hannibal is a huge gearhead and he's gonna balk at the dogs being in the garage.

"Whatever happened to my feisty, rude young man?" he smiles. Touches Will's jaw, skims over his beard. "I'll find him again."

"I'm telling you, I look like a fucking toddler when I shave-"

"How jealous the stiff, old socialites will be of me."

"Reminder: you are a stiff, old socialite."

"Ah! There he is!" Hannibal whispers, as near to glee as Will's ever seen. He dips to kiss him and just smiles, utterly satisfied, right in Will's face. "I must also clean and assemble the new grinder. Commune with your pack while I finish up. Give me forty minutes, please."

He feels himself blush, nearly head-to-toe, which is absurd. He scoffs a little, but draws back too slowly, too reluctantly. "Fucking go commune with your sausage, then," shoves his hands in his pockets and walks backward a little. Hannibal smiles like a dirty secret. It doesn't fade. Will shakes his head. Marches out of the garage to the gate.

In his suit and great, big, warm coat, Hannibal feels like normal. Will feels... even with him. Which shouldn't be surprising. They worked together before they did anything else together. This is like consulting on a case with him.
They shop and they bicker lightly because Hannibal seems to be amused by that, which puts Will in the mood for it. But they don't hold hands. Hannibal doesn't pull Will's hand over his arm and lead him through the stores.

People blink at them, taking a second look. So maybe they're standing a little close. Will doesn't notice it (has never noticed it) until Hannibal meets someone else's eyes in a challenge. There's a bit of a sneer from the other man, like he *smells* what's going on here, and Hannibal just--

Swivels his head to him like he's waiting for input.

Will comes to a halt, almost stepping into Hannibal's back. "Uh. Sorry."

But then he notices. And he stares at the man, too.

And the guy practically trips over himself walking away.

Hannibal puts a hand to his back when Will's paying for the rack he found.

And that's all.

Something's missing. Something's off but he's just realized that it is.

Which leads Will to the suspicion that-

He stops.

"Did you go through my wallet?"

Hannibal gives a slightly offended look. "No."

Will flips through it again. Something is different.

There's another card in here.
"There's another card in here," he says.

Hannibal accepts the bag for him and leads the way out of the store.

Will pulls the black credit card out and that *is* his name. But all his are Visa and this is an American Express. This card is crammed between an aging set of half-used gift cards and- "Centurion Card. This is an actual Black Card," he says to Hannibal's back.

He's blindly walking, staring at this card, and he doesn't look for a response until Hannibal hangs back to touch his shoulder, steer him out of the way of some other people on the street. "This is a Black Card," he says again.

"It is."

"Is this. This is. This is on your account." He stops entirely. "You don't give me credit cards," he declares. "I have money."

"I have more money."

"This is irresponsible."

"It's irresponsible to spend what little you have left when you're so unsure you'll stay with me that you balk at sharing a credit line."
"Woah-woah. I didn't-" he shakes his head. "I didn't say that. No, I did. NO, wait a minute-"

"I did not go through your wallet."

"You put this in there, that's all."

"And if you're not inclined to use it, you won't use it."

Jesus fucking christ. This is a Black Card.

Hannibal bought a house - bought a house, haggled down to just under six million dollars, still hasn't cashed out his TWO properties in Baltimore, and he still has enough money for--

"How fucking much are you worth?? Wait. No. Don't answer that."

He finally stops trying to get Will to progress down the sidewalk, back to the Bentley. He looks around. Waits until no one else is passing near them. "There is a highly-publicized list of the 500 wealthiest individuals living, maintained by Forbes."

"Um. Yeah?"

"Not enough to be on the list."

Intentionally. That's... intentionally so he can maintain his privacy. Will can tell.

They're parked on the street. Hannibal sort of herds him to the spot and puts their stuff in the trunk and Will is just on the curb parsing out the way this is happening right now.

Hannibal is too casual. He was waiting for Will to notice but... expected him to notice sooner? He knew Will would balk. He was prepared for it.

And he won't be budging.

He's kept a little distance as they shopped for Will's equipment because he knew this was coming.

He'll let Will bristle and get his way, regardless, and then, when Will is still puzzling the details together, he'll--

Hannibal holds the passenger door open for him and waits with infinite patience.

The hand-holding and closeness will come next, while Will's preoccupied, so he gets used to it without even noticing.

This is bullshit - Hannibal knows him well, yes, but he shouldn't be able to play him this fast.

Will glares.

He only tilts his head and pulls Will in a little by the hip as a woman jogs by, too close.

Goddamnit. He sits and lets him close the door.

So, in the car, Will looks for the Forbes list on his phone. And he scrolls to the bottom. And the lowest number on it is- "You're worth less than $3.3 billion but you have to have a net worth of at least $16 million to maintain a Black Card. So you're worth between sixteen million dollars and three-point-three billion dollars. Cash, at least, that's not counting liquid and investment properties."
This is rude. This conversation is rude - it's like peak rudeness - and Hannibal is being tight-lipped. Will should really stop. But all that comes out of his mouth is.

"Was your family royalty??"

Hannibal frowns and drives on. "Not quite," he admits.

Fucking hell.

"Where are all your scars from?"

Hannibal blinks at the road like he doesn't understand.

"Your scars. Who beat you up? Why are you scarred up? I didn't know what to think. You said you were adopted. By... by your uncle?"

"Yes."

"Was it... was it him?"

"No."

He said his adoption didn't happen right away. And he's said he has no family. So maybe before he got adopted? Maybe when the rest of his family died? Some of them looked new. Very recent.

At the next stoplight, Hannibal reaches to take his hand. "I admit I had intended to shock you," he confesses, "but not distress you." He's gentle, now. "Please don't concern yourself, Will. I was not abused."

"Beat up at school for being rich? Or did they send you to a military academy or something? Or-"

"Will. Please."

"You intended to shock me. Oh my god. You were showing off," he realizes aloud, having a hard time finding his filter. Unable to steer away from the steeper edge of the very path Hannibal was leading him down.

"Will."

"Just. I donno. Just make out with me next time?"

Hannibal huffs a laugh. "Why not both?"

"It costs like a thousand dollars to even add a credit line to a Black Card account. You spent-"

"Yes. I spend. How else am I to keep myself off the Forbes list?" He sounds slightly amused by now. "I was advised that my overseas accounts are beginning to look suspicious-"

"Overseas accounts--"

"And my research seldom yields fully-accountable nonprofits to-"

"So you're like. Castle rich. Like you don't work for the money rich. You work as a psychiatrist just for fun?"

"Can a rich man not have an occupation to fill his days, enlighten himself, help others-"
"I could, conceivably, take this card," he waves it, "and go buy, like." He envisions it, hands spanning wide over the dashboard. "An entire kennel. Just for myself."

When Hannibal is trying not to get caught laughing, he freezes, sits straight and attentive and puts on his most flawless, impartial, professional face. Will is glad he was never his actual therapist because that would have been a spirit-crushing realization to come to in the middle of a mortifying story while he was paying a rich dude an exorbitant rate to help him parse out his personal problems. "I would ask you not to," Hannibal says calmly.

"Yeah. No kidding."

"You are not irresponsible and I am used to a certain standard and quality of-"

"Okay." Will puts it back in his wallet. Puts his wallet back in his pocket. Puts his hands on his knees and watches the city go by. He lets the silence envelop them for a while. "This is a fucking huge life change," he blows out a deep breath.

"I understand that. I don't mean for it to be disorienting. I simply want to make it as easy as possible for you."

"You think I'm gonna turn into this eventually?" he can only motion around the interior of the Bentley but he thinks he gets the message across.

"No. I think you will grow and change and it won't happen in a few weeks like the rest of this has. I understand one doesn't float across the country assisting his father and building boat motors and fostering strays and suddenly find himself comfortable on a property like ours."

"A home. A home like ours," he feels compelled to correct. It comes from deep within him. Someplace unstoppable.

It makes Hannibal smile. "In a home like ours. While you are ready to spend time with a partner and willing to let my life impact you, you won't be prepared, all at once, to live as I do. And this is understandable. I, however, am compelled to -- and, of course, equipped to -- extend any convenience and luxury which might tempt you to stay. Or to give me the benefit of any doubts which may arise."

"You don't." Will sighs. "You don't have to try so hard."

"I am not trying hard!" at last, he seems a little exasperated. "I told you to take up unused space for your outdoor hobbies and I slipped a credit card into your wallet. You have not yet asked me for anything which I could not spare, Will. You asked me to help you, once, which was what I had been waiting to do and wanting to do. At my prompting you quit the-"

He stops. Takes a breath.

Will quit the FBI because Hannibal told him he had to start accepting his illness as a mental illness. Sutcliffe backed up his theory because it was easy to do. It gave Sutcliffe a brain to play with.

Will quit the FBI because Hannibal said it would be better for him to get away from that situation.

Jack drew him back in when he still believed he was mentally ill.

No one but Sutcliffe knew that wasn't true.

"You feel like you're asking too much. You feel guilty for making me quit. Even if it was gonna save
my life - even if it did, completely by accident, save my life - you feel guilty for leading me to that conclusion. You think you made me quit," he pieces together.

"I was instrumental in convincing you to do so," he says quietly. Taking a turn and heading to a parking garage.

Even if it isn't, it feels like his fault. Hannibal thinks it's his fault that Will's life got upended.

So, basically, he really is having a hard time with all the deaths, all the changes, the things he's done and said. Just like he fantasized about ways his actions could have saved Abigail's mother or saved Abigail, herself, some pain, if he had unfrozen during the encounter at the Hobbs' house; he's wondering, again, what he could have done differently.

The way it all worked out was... hell. It was all just one, big, messy hell and people are dead who shouldn't be. He feels guilt. He's a little confused.

And that's okay.

Will lets him park and turn off the car. He reaches for his hand when he pulls the keys from the ignition. "Hey. This is all fucked up. But what's not fucked up is that you shouted through the fog of... hallucinations and Encephalitis and fear. And I managed to listen to it. I managed to hear you. We are alive and that's not fucked up. And we're okay. We don't have to get married next week. We don't have to live on fast-forward just because we survived. Yes, this is going kind of fast. But we haven't had... average courtship experiences," Will shrugs. If Hannibal wanted him the first time he made Will laugh, in Minnesota, their first-date-breakfast-to-family-homicide comes to mind. "The point is," he says, only loud enough to be heard over the hush of the cars on the other levels, "you don't have to give me equal share of a house and your bank accounts and become a dad to my dogs in some mad scramble to make sure I understand that you care. I do know you care. I think you cared a little too much from day one and your only mistake has been... I guess... agreeing to rubber-stamp me for Jack. I know you were never officially my doctor, but maybe we crossed a line by acting like you kind of were whenever it was easiest. And I was totally complicit in that."

Hannibal turns his hand to thread their fingers and grips Will tight. He stares at their hands. "I didn't make Daniel show me the scans. I wanted to. I trusted him."

"That's not your fault at all."

"If we knew it was Encephalitis, you would have been in recovery. Perhaps Alana would have lived. Perhaps you and Jack might have taken Gideon down."

"And, perhaps, while our backs were turned, the Ripper would have reduced Jack and me to amuse-bouche." He thumbs at Hannibal's hand. "You should be proud of me, I remember what an amuse-bouche is," he kind of whispers.

Hannibal smiles. "I am quite proud, yes." His hand goes so tight around Will's.

"We still don't know that you were wrong, by the way. Hannibal, I... see too much."

"An active imagination. A part of who you are."

"Bordering on mental illness. Bordering on it, let's not even act like that's an impossibility. I stared.... at Marissa Schurr. And Cassie Boyle. And so many bodies after Garett Jacob Hobbs. And I felt-- even on my best, sanest days, I still felt like I had a hand in their deaths."

"It is only because you see too clearly. And feel so deeply. Perhaps... I am a bit jealous that you don't..."
feel me that deeply."

It stings a little, hearing that. "You need some privacy. You need the freedom to tell me, in your own time, when you love me and when you're frustrated with me. Are you frustrated with me?"

Hannibal is unmoving. Until he nods a little. "You are right in that we don't need to push our relationship forward at a fast pace. But I have so much for myself. And you are so beautiful and so underappreciated. I cannot help but want to display the jewel I found that everybody else passed by. I cannot help but feel that I must show you how much I wish to be a factor which makes your life easier. I understand that could make it... messy. If we separated. I can afford the mess. And I would never -"

"You would never make me feel the fallout. Because you don't know how to be a bad guy," Will nods. "I know. I know. Okay. So, listen: I'm sorry you're frustrated. I can learn to accept some of this stuff. I'll learn to ask for things from you. But the idea that-- the society thing is freaking me out. And I know you love operas and concerts and art openings and dinner parties and. You know I've never been a fan of those things. You know I don't belong there. But I don't want you to stop doing what you love because of me. So I'm just... having trouble adjusting. Maybe I can't let you dress me in a tux quite yet."

"I was not going to begin with tuxedoes."

Will smiles and laughs. "I know. I'm pretty sure you were going to start with my socks and underwear. I can carry this card around. I understand where you're coming from and that you have a fucking finance manager because you don't even know how much you're worth, you just don't want it publicized."

Hannibal sighs.

"I need to build that doghouse - because I don't want you to be uncomfortable in your own home. You can get used to the dogs at your own pace. If Winston is the only one you can handle, I understand. Maybe I won't be rescuing anymore in the future. That would be okay. You understand that I don't think I can be on your arm, yet. In the society pages and- you may not want to be on the Forbes Five Hundred, but you've got a certain amount of ego. You do want to show me off. Which. Okay. Sounds weird from here. But, being who I am? Seeing what I see? I get it."

Hannibal wraps his other hand around Will's, too.

He likes that. Likes being understood.

Will was really trying not to be intrusive. Hannibal is a private man in a lot of ways, as this money thing proves; but he's been unattached as long as Will has known him. As far back as he's heard about from Alana.

And Will has always been a little worried that, being that Hannibal's from another country, there might be some shit that gets lost in translation. There's still a slim chance of that.

He didn't want to read anything into Hannibal. He wanted Hannibal to speak for himself.

Now he knows that Hannibal wishes Will would use his intuition. His empathy.

Hannibal once joked that Will is the only one who connects to other peoples' brains like mycelia.

Maybe Hannibal does get lost in translation, still, as brilliant and learned as he is. And he wants someone to just know him. To just know and accept him.
He gave Will a credit card. A home. Free access to his life.

He broke down his own wall to let Will in. And Will was trying not to step close too fast.

"You told me, a little while ago, that you thought that you and Alana might have a thing once. You were drawn to her," Will tries to say it gently. "But you never did. She's dead and it feels like a missed opportunity. And you feel bad for thinking that when, at the same time, you kind of also don't feel bad because I went to you and told you I kissed her. I kissed her and fucking threw it in your face, not knowing that. It turns out, you were waiting for me to see you as something more, in that exact moment." Will knows this and many other things. Remembers the tight look Hannibal had that night. A stiffness that wasn't totally unexpected, but felt a little too personal to make sense of when it happened.

The reasons are clear, now.

All the little ways we never know we're hurting other people.

Will says all this so that Hannibal understands that he grasps both the incomparably intelligent as well as the unflattering things about him. Without trying. That's what Will's brain does. He has no choice in what he feels and comes to understand. "Once I open this up and walk into it, it washes through me. I'll come to know so much about you, I'll absorb it. Reflect it on accident. I'm actually worried it will be more unsettling for you than for me. I'm used to it and I trust you and I'm sure, I'm positive that it can only make me a better person. Because opening up to someone I like so much is... the ultimate. Like a fantasy I didn't think I'd get to fulfill." Will truly never anticipated he'd love someone who knew so much about him. Or that he'd also kind of feel comfortable about that.

"I don't think that well of myself," Hannibal finally says. "I am a man and I have doubts about my own worth as a man quite often. And I'm afraid I'd rather damn the consequences in the pursuit of a closer connection to you. Whatever brings us closer. I don't wish to lose you, entirely, under the wash of my own personality. And it would be a psychiatrist's pleasure to attempt to hold us both up above the waves."

"What is.... with us and the ocean metaphors?" Will shakes his head.

"Perhaps we are destined to disappear into the sea someday. Take only one another and never return."

"Run away across the ocean and dance and drink and eat until no one else and nothing else matters?" Will absolutely sees the romance in that. It might be the first time he's seen a vision of himself as an old man without a broken mind or spirit. It's really beautiful. It really is.

Hannibal squeezes his hand. "It would be the honor of my life to do even one of those things with you until my dying days."

"My real talent lies in the eating. I don't wanna brag or anything but. I'm great at it. Chew with my mouth closed and everything."

"You drink quite well. You enchant me in all manner of dancing we've done so far. Physical and intellectual."

"We can dance more. I could learn." When Hannibal squeezes his hand this time, the image comes unbidden: the first thing he's gonna do, when Will is ready, is attend a dinner with him. Dance with him in front of people until he stops blushing and just lets Hannibal lead him across the floor. Lets other people become jealous of the way they work so well together. "Kiss me and let's keep
shopping," he tugs on Hannibal's hand a little. "C'mon. We're good, okay? We can do this. If you need me to let my walls down to you. Well. I'll try my best. I promise."

"You do? Will you promise?"

"Yeah."

Hannibal nods. Shifts in the seat to come kiss him. "I didn't mean for the card to push you in any-"

"I'm fine. I can use the card. You're right." As an added bonus, if they did happen to break up, he knows Hannibal would never sue him for the value of whatever he took back to Wolf Trap. He wouldn't want his name in the papers or a lawsuit filed with his name on it.

The house in Wolf Trap stands alone and cold, right now. He knows he won't be back inside for years, if he ever is.

When they get out of the car, Hannibal waits to take his hand as they walk down to the nearby shops. Gets nice and clingy, just as Will predicted. "I guess. I guess I'm gonna ask for something."

"Alright," Hannibal pulls Will's hand over his arm.

"We could have my old house gutted and flipped and. We can give it to Abigail. So she always has a place to go back to. So she always has peace."

"That would be wonderful, Will. Though I wouldn't want to tell her until she's agreed to go to university. I'm worried she won't ever find the courage to go."

"She'll go," Will knows she will. "She'll cut and dye her hair. And get tattoos. And ask us to help her change her name. And she'll go to school and she'll be okay. We can help her with that."

"Tattoos?"

"Maybe. For the scar. Maybe later in life, but she will. She'll reclaim it as her own skin. Her own scar and her own history."

Hannibal nods. "Our paperwork should clear within the month."

"You should offer her your last name. She would take it from you. Definitely not from me. Probably from you."

Hannibal pats his hand. "We shall think on the plan for a while and then present it to her when she comes home."

Will bumps into his side while they walk. "Okay."

Hannibal turns and smiles and opens the door to the shop for him.

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