Ill Intentions

by LiaS0

Summary

AU in which Will Graham is a disenchanted journalist, resigned to his fate of back-page wedding announcements at Tattler News. He has a watch that beeps to tell him when to get water, when to go for a walk, and when to eat, but he hasn’t yet found a program to tell him how to feel when the Chesapeake Ripper of all people sends Fanmail.

Dear Will Graham,
I adored your analysis of the Minnesota Shrike. How quickly you boxed him into a corner and revealed his hand! Surely the ladies on campus will sleep better knowing to avoid anyone that looks remotely like them with a father in tow. That, or perhaps you’ve inspired them all to dye their hair a poignant shade of blonde until the next killer comes along.
I wonder if your clever little mind would be able to catch someone like me, however; would you be interested in playing a game, Mr. Graham? I’ve grown bored as of late, and the city is not much to entertain these days. You can respond in your new column. Congratulations, by the way.
-Chesapeake Ripper.

He really shouldn’t be excited that there are lives at stake. In reality, though, Will hasn’t felt much in a long, long time.
Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1:

Will was trying very hard not to slam his head against his desk.

Deadlines were one thing; he’d struggled meeting deadlines most of his life, from getting to class on time in high school to finishing a paper due promptly at midnight in college—what professor wanted a paper posted by midnight, anyway? What professor decided that at midnight, they’d wake from their recliner in their tenure-paid home and pad over to their HP, gleefully closing the submissions link on the assignment before anyone else could turn it in? Did they grade it immediately after, from 12:01 to 4:00 where they’d finally pass out at their desk, exhausted but proud of their ability to really dig it to the students whose hopes were crushed at exactly 12:02 when they realized with a sinking sensation that they couldn’t turn their paper in?

He told himself tangents were just another way to get out of the task at hand.

Deadlines were one thing. He’d gotten better at deadlines in the ‘adult world’, gotten better at a watch that kept him on track and on time with its beeps, dings, and notifications. Most of his life revolved around the smartwatch that even reminded him when it was the last time he’d eaten or stood up from his uneven, wobbly desk. Time was odd for him, but that small, sturdy little electronic had kept him on time for the past four years. More or less.

No, no, the problem at hand was writer’s block.

“Dear Bev, I’ve heard a lot about the Minnesota Shrike, and it makes me scared to go to class. He’s targeted universities all over this area, from Maryland, Virginia, New York, Maine; when will the FBI catch him? What kind of person would do that to these girls?”

He considered the other questions Beverly had chosen to answer, then compared it to this one. ‘Chats with Bev’ was the long-running advice column at Tattler News, a high-ratings paper that—in his opinion—verged dramatically towards gossip-fodder and tabloids at times rather than news. It was a job, though. Four years out of college and at least he could say he had a job.

This, however; this was not his job.

“It’s not really right for me to do this,” he called out irritably to Beverly across the room. “I’m not ‘Bev’.”

“A bet’s a bet, no matter how drunk we were,” Beverly replied cheerfully. She wasn’t the least bit perturbed by his expression, or by the way his fingers tapped angrily against the keys.

“I have no idea what to say to these people,” he muttered.

“Hey, you’re getting credit for writing the column this week. That’s a little extra money in your pocket, right?”

Right. He rubbed his face, leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette, letting it hang from his lips as he considered the question. It was a little ham-handed sitting below ‘my husband is cheating on me’, but it was a little awkward just above ‘what can I expect when my daughter starts her period?’ It was a serious question, one bred from terror and fear. The Minnesota Shrike had been attacking for months, no word on whether or not he’d be caught anytime soon, what with the way the FBI was trying to keep things under wraps.
That wasn’t his problem, though. His problem was writer’s block, and trying to make a reply that was engaging, informative, and colorful enough that when it hit the third page of Tattler News, neither he nor Beverly would lose their jobs.

He sighed, took a drag of the cigarette, then promptly put it out in the ash tray. It was a nasty habit, one he’d been trying to break for years.

At least he’d had the smoking habit longer than he’d had the writer’s block.

He pulled up articles, news, and reports on the Minnesota Shrike, staring down at them and tapping his fingers over the words. The reply needed something delicate, something carefully constructed rather than the normal garb that told people to stay safe and remain in groups. He wasn’t targeting just people, he was targeting women. He wasn’t just targeting women, he had a type.

That type was now currently terrified.

He poured himself a finger of whiskey, sighed quietly. It was going to be a long night with him and the Minnesota Shrike.

Writing was a comfort when it worked. It was as much a release as it was a barrier, one where Will could spend his days behind the comfort of a computer screen rather than interact with people. He knew how to interact — the application of eye contact was sorely lacking. That made people nervous, as much as being stared at for too long made him nervous. His watch beeped. He needed to drink some water.

He couldn’t, though, not with his boss staring so acutely across the desk at him.

“Beverly told me about you chiming in on her column. I approved it, seeing as how it’d already been done,” he said. A cigarette was tucked behind his ear, the remnants of his own bad habit. Will figured that editor’s offices in the newspaper industries were probably the last safe havens of many things, from comma splices to typos to chain smoking. The air was thick with it, and he inhaled deeply and nodded.

“If it wasn’t right, sir, I understand,” he said, studying the pen holder. Two weeks later and he was going to reap what he’d sowed.

“Right? You know how popular ‘Chats with Bev’ is? It’s page three for a reason; housewives across this god damn town been sending me questions and e-mails for years, wanting advice from some faceless woman with a penchant for telling it like it is. You know what you did when Beverly let you take a whack at it, eh?” Charlie was one half of the writing spectrum whose prose on paper was enough to make knees weak, but his speech left much to be desired. Will figured he spent so much time making his words pretty on paper that there was none left for real human interaction.

Will could personally identify with that.

“Did I ruin ratings?” he asked weakly.

“Ruin them? Hell, kid, I’ve got triple what I’ve ever gotten! Men, women, teenagers, fuckin sororities sending in group messages. It wasn’t your advice on periods because you’re in way over your head with that, fuck, don’t ever try and give advice on that again.” A warning glance was tossed his way. “These people are asking us about killers, Will. You’re making them all sorts of excited about killers.”
“What?” Disbelief colored his tone uncomfortable, his cheeks red.

“I spent a lot of time thinking about this, EllaofGWU. I think it was a sign of my privilege, being a mid-twenties male that I didn’t know that much about the Minnesota Shrike, and for that I’m sorry. There must be a little bit of resentment, I’m sure, walking down campus with brown hair and fair skin, terrified to realize that you are part of a demographic that someone horrendous has targeted.

“I can’t say when the FBI will catch him, but your other question sat with me for a long time: what kind of person would do that to these girls? There is the hope that they’re alive, but after contemplating that question, alone and ignorant in front of my computer, I think I can safely but regretfully surmise that they’re not. This person, after attempting to get to know such a person through the many lines of type and black #321 ink, is not keeping these girls.

“He uses them, you see, to feed a need. He is delicate, meticulous, able to completely disappear with them without leaving a single trace. They are a proxy, a stand-in for the one he holds dear, the one he so desperately yearns to consume. He loves them in his own way because he loves her –his golden ticket. What kind of person would do that, you ask me? Someone that hungers. Someone that can’t remove the intrusive thoughts from their head. He is sick, and he very much has a daughter that looks a lot like you.

“They say don’t talk with strangers, but that’s not the concern, is it? Don’t just avoid men with invasive questions, EllaofGWU. Avoid their daughters that look like you. A girl that looks alone, camping out at campuses to see which one to attend, whose father watches in the background with love and admiration; avoid them. He hunted these women, and if there’s one thing we know about hunters, they tend to enjoy using bait. Whether the bait is aware of this or not, though, we can’t say.”

Charlie’s eyes pricked pins in his un-ironed button-up after he finished reading Will’s answer aloud. Will shifted, busied himself with filling a plastic cup full of water in the corner. It sat full because Charlie never drank it. The sun from the window made it warm, but he’d deal with it.

“It took up a lot of space, so we bumped the period question because your answer was about as tactful as a senior tugging at a freshman’s panties,” he rumbled. “But we printed this one.”

“They liked it?” he asked, glancing up. His teeth worried over the lip of the cup before he took a sip.

“They fucking loved it! They ate it up, begged for more –some lady just down the road stopped me at Hank’s Hotdogs and started pestering me about wanting you to write about Ted Bundy, and I just fuckin stared at her like she was a shark before I realized they loved you talking about killers, kid. They fuckin loved you talking about the crazies.”

“Death sells,” Will muttered.

“Death, sex, intrigue, conspiracies, scandals, and serial killers. Sometimes, serial killers fall into all five before it, and they ate you up. They want you to have your own column, your own space where they can ask you all about these things. I been getting fuckin calls all week, asking if you were gonna collaborate with Bev again.”

“I cover weddings, mostly,” Will defended. It was a weak defense, one without much passion or care. He hastily took another sip of water.

“Your wedding covers have been weak lately. Freddie was suggesting tossing you, but this…” Charlie jabbed a finger down on the latest paper, grinning. “This is golden, kid. I feel like this
was a bit of a redemption, something to remind me you can actually write some good shit.”

“Freddie is always suggesting to toss me,” Will grumbled.

“Well, when you’re front page news material, I’ll give you that same ear, how’s that?”

“Right.”

“Until then, I’m getting them to move some of the ads around, bring them down to maybe a 5.5 to make room for your new column. Chats with Bev, meet your male-killing-counterpart, ‘Will Intentions’.”

“Will Intentions,” Will echoed. The name sounded corny, trivial.

“A play off of Ill Intentions, you know? Doesn’t matter, doesn’t matter.” Charlie waved a hand dismissively, grabbed the half-finished cigarette behind his ear and lit it. A sign the conversation was over. “I’ve got Cassie on Weddings now; you’re writing my crime-hungry column, got it?”

“Got it.” A beat. “Thank you, sir.”

He walked out of the office, found his desk and sat down, stunned. He had his own column. He wasn’t stuck writing cheap wedding announcements anymore.

His watch beeped; a reminder he needed to finish his water.

He downed it, crushed the cup and tossed it in the wastebasket beneath the desk that leaned somewhat too far to the left. Idly, he grabbed two books and propped the leg up to straighten it, blinking small spreads of stars out of his eyes at the thought that he, Will-fucking-Graham, had sat in his corner of Tattler News for four years and had finally gotten out of his stupid, sanguine-sweet wedding announcements all because he’d made a bet with Beverly while drunk about who could eat the most boiled eggs in under a minute.

What in the hell was real life?

“I heard the news,” Beverly said, standing in front of his desk. He straightened in his chair, adjusted the setting Beverly had no doubt changed when she’d sat down to hunt through his drawers for a highlighter, and smiled a little.

“Will Intentions?”

“Not my idea, swear to god,” she snickered. “I think Freddie.”

“Freddie,” Will groused, shaking his mouse to wake up the computer. “She was trying to get me fired before this.”

“Your wedding announcements were getting a little lackluster,” Beverly pointed out. She sat on the edge of his desk, hip jutted to keep her balanced. “There are only so many times you can mention baby’s breath.”

“I never want to hear baby’s breath again,” Will warned her.

“Are you excited?” she asked.

“It’s not really setting in yet,” he admitted. He let the words roll around in his head: no more wedding announcements. From now on, Will Intentions.
Whatever the hell Will Intentions meant.

“They’re going to bring by the letters, and I’ll forward you the e-mails. Basically, you choose the five best and answer them. Easy, right? I think that’ll help it set in.”

“Easy,” he echoed with a nod.

Beverly shifted, and he watched the leg of his desk wobble threateningly. He wondered if he’d get a new desk if the column worked out. He also wondered if he’d tank abysmally, and Freddie Lounds would be able to see him get the can after all.

His watch beeped to tell him to eat.

He ate as he went through a stack of letters that would have intimidated a lesser man who’d forgotten his lunch. They were quaint, from compliments of his analysis to questions regarding past killers like Bundy or Dahmer. He wasn’t as interested in those as he was the questions about why the police don’t take missing persons cases as seriously, or what caused a teenager to bring a gun to school. Those were recent. Those were fresh, raw wounds. He set those aside, as well as the compliments—a bit of an ego booster in truth.

There was one that made him pause, though, something written on plain white paper with what looked like a fountain pen. Will was somewhat of a connoisseur of pens—he liked to think most writers had a special type of pen, something they used for their best work on bus rides and random notepads while walking in the park. He touched the long-dried ink, nodded to himself. A fountain pen, and a nicely edged one at that.

Dear Will Graham,

I adored your analysis of the Minnesota Shrike. How quickly you boxed him into a corner and revealed his hand! Surely the ladies on campus will sleep better knowing to avoid anyone that looks remotely like them with a father in tow. That, or perhaps you’ve inspired them all to dye their hair a poignant shade of blonde until the next killer comes along.

I wonder if your clever little mind would be able to catch someone like me, however; would you be interested in playing a game, Mr. Graham? I’ve grown bored as of late, and the city is not much to entertain these days. You can respond in your new column. Congratulations, by the way.

-Chesapeake Ripper.

He kept that one because he was curious. Pranks were common, especially when killings were mentioned. He’d once done a paper on the amount of time and money wasted on dealing with false calls during murder investigations, psychos claiming credit for what someone else had done. He read over it once, twice; a third time made him set it by the only photo on his desk, a pack of dogs in an open field. He’d gotten his first crazy, and he hadn’t even done the column yet.

He was intercepted as he was leaving work, the sun falling fast behind the skyscrapers and high-rise buildings of DC. The man wasn’t so much tall as he was broad-shouldered and stout; the trench coat and sunglasses get-up was about as obvious as a black eye, but Will wasn’t going to mention it. He looked him up and down, hitched his backpack up higher, and walked around him.

“Will Graham?” the man asked.

“Something I can help you with?”
“In a hurry?”

“Got a bus to catch,” he replied, still walking. The man kept pace, and Will noted the large black suburban following along.

“I’m Agent Crawford of the FBI, and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions.”

“I’ve got a bus, Agent Crawford,” said Will. He noted the flash of a shiny badge in the corner of his eye, although he didn’t stop. If he missed his bus, it was a five mile hike home and he wasn’t inclined to that sort of exercise if he could help it. He was a writer, not some god damn athlete.

“We’ll give you a ride,” Crawford assured him.

“My dad always taught me not to talk to strangers, and if they offered to give me a ride I was supposed to run screaming to the nearest adult.”

“We caught the Minnesota Shrike, Mr. Graham.”

That did stop him. Will paused, puzzled, then looked to Crawford. His watch beeped to remind him that he had a bus to catch. He hardly heard the noise.

“…What?”

“I read your reply in Tattler News last week, and it intrigued me. Enough that I looked back through a few things on the case I’d been currently investigating, and we found what was necessary to catch the Minnesota Shrike.” Crawford held the badge in hand, prepared to show it to Will again.

“You caught him?” His throat was dry. His watch didn’t beep to tell him to get water, but he figured he could use a glass of it.

“We caught him,” Crawford affirmed. “Now, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

Will decided that he didn’t mind much at all. His palms were dry, although his heart had begun to jerk about against his ribs rather unsteadily.

They sat down at a small café crammed into the corner of a building two blocks away, and Will stirred his mocha around idly, watching Crawford’s mouth as Crawford watched him. He had a presence about himself, something brutish and capable. Will wondered what his fingers would write out if he’d had the chance to describe him. Lips that turned down, a tarnished gold wedding band; this was not the sort of man with a happy marriage, as of late. He had his work, though. He had the Minnesota Shrike.

“It was just a question,” he explained. “Someone asked a question in the advice column, and I looked through some articles and made a guess.”

“A guess.”

“Yeah.” A pause as he took a sip of his drink. “I mean, a good guess, right? My major was criminal psychology and forensics. I kind of knew what I was looking for.”

“But you’re in journalism,” Crawford pointed out.

“Yeah, well…I didn’t get into the FBI. I’d double majored, and the second was journalism.” Will tried to make his shrug as nonchalant as possible. Strict psychological screening procedures and
“You couldn’t fight crime, so you wrote about crime,” Crawford mused. He stirred sugar into his coffee and finally looked away from studying Will so intently. “How’d you guess he was using his daughter as bait?”

“What?”

A pause, brief enough to tell Will the answer. “…Yes. When we went into the house, he tried to kill her. She was his — how’d you call it?”

“His golden ticket.”

“His golden ticket,” Jack repeated.

“They’re all from universities. He had to be a visitor, someone going to and from without notice, right? The profile said he was middle-aged, so either he’s working with a company that works with all of those universities — possible but not likely — or he’s got something that makes it not weird for him to be there, staring at students. Girls know to be wary of boys, but if he’s got his daughter asking questions or just trying to make friends, why would the victims be worried?” Will took another sip to try and hide how nervous he was, answering these questions. He hadn’t done anything wrong, but he felt mighty guilty, somehow.

“How’d you know they wouldn’t be alive?”

“Why keep taking them if he’s still got the stand-in?” Will asked.

Jack nodded, accepting this. They sipped their coffee in silence, and Will’s watch beeped to tell him he should be home and fixing dinner by now. He downed his drink, stood up. Jack followed suit and offered him a ride in the SUV.

He left him his card, whatever that meant. Will tucked it in his pocket all the same, waved him off at the entrance to the complex. Call if you need anything, he’d said. Maybe he’d call and ask for one of those fountain pens, the kind the high-ranking got after a particularly bristly promotion. Will scuffed his shoe, snorted. He was a writer, not some weird FBI crime fighter.

Granted, he’d once wanted to be, when he thought maybe people could overlook his weird idiosyncrasies and inability to hold conversations very well with random strangers. He’d once thought maybe his quirks at seeing far too much about a person would lend a task force some insight they’d missed. If he could see through the eyes of the guy next door that was cheating on his long-term girlfriend, couldn’t he also see through the eyes of a killer terrorizing a city?

Apparently so, since he’d helped the FBI inadvertently catch a killer.

Psychological screening procedures and what-not, though. Behind the screen of a laptop was where he best shined now, not running around trying to find serial killers to bring them to justice. Truth be told, it wasn’t just the justice part that was enticing, it was the finding, the knowing. Save people from dying, understand the person behind the bloodied knife. There was something oddly cathartic at the thought that the twisted and sometimes horrendous way he looked at things was actually helpful for once — like a chair of antlers, grotesque but useful.

That was that, though. No matter how buzzed his veins were at the idea he’d helped, in his own way, catch the Minnesota Shrike, it was time to get back to the real world. The real world had deadlines. His watch beeped again to tell him he should have eaten by now.
He ate a bowl of oatmeal and considered the letters he’d narrowed it down to. He’d have to look at the killers they referenced, the murders that’d taken place.

_I saw the Minnesota Shrike was caught—amazing. Just amazing. Women are being found in the bay here, and I was wondering what your thoughts were on that? They’re not calling it a serial killer because they’re prostitutes, but get real. Pimps don’t just start killing their prostitutes willy-nilly and so easily found. So many, too. Way too many, don’t you think?_

At the bottom of the stack, he kept his first crazy fanmail, fingers tracing over the signature. He’d heard vague accounts of the Chesapeake Ripper, although after his realization he’d never be an agent he’d tried to put such thoughts out of his head. They only served to tease him with what he’d never have.

No matter. It was a prank, although a flattering one. It sat at the bottom of the stack to remind him that when given the right opportunity, he actually was a decent writer. Enough to bring a psycho out to play.

-  

The next morning, as he shuffled across creaking wooden floors and made a pot of coffee, he blinked sleep from his eyes and contemplated the beeping on his wrist. Time to get up. Don’t forget coffee. Without coffee, you’re late for work.

It took him far too long to really open his eyes, and as he spooned cold cereal into his mouth, it took approximately half of the bowl and four minutes on his watch to realize his laptop was propped open on the table. He turned it to shut it, confused since he thought he’d powered it down the night before. A yawn, eyes watering and mouth painfully gaping took him aback, and he covered his mouth with the spoon. It took another minute for him to realize what he was seeing, since the coffee was in his stomach but not quite in his bloodstream.

There, propped up on the screen of the laptop, was the fanmail from the ‘Chesapeake Ripper’. As if to tease him, to convince him he hadn’t just left there before he’d gone to bed, a golden sticker had been placed at the top of the sheet, as if to beg him, _me, me; pick me._
Chapter 2:

He really, really shouldn’t have picked it.

In between the concern about the prostitutes being targeted and the police refusing to see it as more than normal criminal-on-criminal violence and the wonder at how a killer walked free due to the abuse of evidence, he put the enticing blurb in, although he refused to put the name on the end.

I adored your analysis of the Minnesota Shrike. How quickly you boxed him into a corner and revealed his hand! Surely the ladies on campus will sleep better knowing to avoid anyone that looks remotely like them with a father in tow. That, or perhaps you’ve inspired them all to dye their hair a poignant shade of blonde until the next killer comes along.

I wonder if your clever little mind would be able to catch someone like me, however; would you be interested in playing a game, Mr. Graham? I’ve grown bored as of late, and the city is not much to entertain these days.

He thought it’d give a bit of a teaser to the readers, something that would give them enough to ask for clarification. He wanted interest, not panic. He also liked the exciting way that it made a small zing of pleasure curl down his spine. He hadn’t been excited about many things for a long, long time. His world since graduating from GWU left much to be desired, no matter how much he enjoyed writing. When he presented it to Charlie, the man grinned around his cigarette and nodded.

“I like it.”

He liked it, Beverly liked it, and when Will saw the ratings for his newly released column, ‘Will Intentions’, his eyebrows almost hit his hairline. Other people liked it, too.

Hegrabbed one off of a newspaper stand, just because. A stupidly sentimental souvenir to celebrate his moving from wedding announcements, baby’s breath, and a back page with a 5.5 font.

Thank you for the congratulations, anon, although I’m not so much in the way of catching rather than analyzing. In reality, from the safety of a swivel chair I think anyone could try their hand at playing the sleuth, at observing unbiased evidence and coming to some sort of conclusion.

As to the mention of your game, I’m very poor at playing games; you can ask several of my associates who find me a bore at work functions, even the celebratory kind. If you give me something to analyze, though, I think I could be of service.

He cut the column because of sentimental reasons that made him itch, and he pinned it to the corkboard alongside the letter with the gold star. Staring at it, a cup of water in hand, he supposed that he should be terrified at the prospect of the how of the star –he wasn’t. In truth, he hadn’t been afraid of much for a long, long time.

His watch beeped much later in the day; time to eat lunch. He wondered, as he ate a hotdog of questionable origin, if he could find a program for the smart watch to remind him to feel things like fear in the face of a potential serial killer at large, egged on by his ability to accidentally lead the FBI to a cannibalistic father of one.
There wasn’t any such program to remind him to feel things like that, but as it chimed to show him e-mails coming in with more letters from eager readers, he stupidly hoped the ‘Chesapeake Ripper’ would be one of them.

“Will Intentions is a hit,” Freddie informed him at the water cooler.

It wasn’t so much of a compliment as it was an observation. Will hit the small notification on the smart watch to assure it that he was drinking water. “I’m relieved.”

“Did you think it wouldn’t be?” She flipped hair over her shoulder, a wild array of curls in so many hues he wondered just how an artist would describe it. How would a writer describe it? Scarlet, auburn, sunset russet? Ringlets, curls, waves, oceans of red surrounding a pinched, surly expression?

“Sometimes the hype dies down after one intriguing iota of information.”

“It helps that the next front page was me covering the Hobbs story,” she assured him.

“A good read,” he admitted. It hurt in a burning sort of way to say that, seeing as how Freddie Lounds was shit. He had to play nice, though. He was page three, and she was top-half news. Beverly called it office politics. He called it asinine.

“I thought it’d be good, since they take their questions to you after they eat out of my palm,” she said, and she tossed her cup in the trash as they walked away. Will stopped at his desk, and she found her way to a cubicle right beside Charlie’s office. It was bigger, more spacious. If Will Intentions continued to impress, would he one day have a space like that? Maybe his watch could also remind him to care about that, too.


Dear Will,

Loved the analysis on the Minnesota Shrike. My boyfriend’s been acting weird – is he a killer? He lies a lot, he’s gone for hours, won’t clean the house…

Oh, god.

Dear Will,

Why do you think a person with intrusive thoughts would kill? Is it a temporary delusion, or are some people just born wanting to kill people?

Maybe.

Dear Will,

Do you not wish for people to know who I am, therefore you refer to me as anon? Quaint.

Bingo.

I don’t mind as much as I should; in reality all of my work is only noticed by the name assigned to me by the press rather than my real name. Chesapeake Ripper. After the cleverness of the Minnesota Shrike’s name, I find myself mildly offended that I wasn’t given the same twist of words. What would you call me, I wonder?
As for analysis, is that not the best sort of game? I give you clues, you try to find where the bodies are. Easy as pie, I’m told. If you’re quick enough, maybe you could save a few in the process.

I read your wedding announcements and compared them to your analysis of Garrett Jacob Hobbs; truly you were put into a bad place, writing things about the way the vines curled over the trellis or the flowers braided into the hair of a blushing bride. It was lackluster, and you weren’t quite fulfilled in your work. No wonder you were almost fired.

Your analysis though, that is where you truly shined. I could feel your intimate thoughts through the paper, the concern for those girls, the knowing that made you caution them. Something cryptic, something that made readers want more. You’d been drowning in chiffon and petticoats for so long, but you thrived on the idea of death. Are serial killers your muse, Will Graham? If so, I think you’re going to enjoy what’s next. I’ll give you a little warm-up.

This thing all things devour:

Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays kings, ruins town,
And beats high mountains down.

You have 3 days

-Avid Fan

“Fuck,” Will muttered, reading it. He was quite good at riddles, if he did say so himself. This though, with the threat of a life, he grabbed the letter –plain white copier paper with a fountain pen, if he wasn’t mistaken –and he marched to Charlie’s office, knocking with his fist rather than his knuckles. It smarted, made a rough, heavy thudding noise against the particle board.

“I’m up to my ass in phone calls; what,” he demanded irritably. Will hesitated by the door, glanced to Freddie sitting in a chair with legs daintily crossed, then back to his boss.

“You liked the anon wanting to play games, right?” he asked.

“Yeah?” Charlie gave him a look that said quite clearly, you’d better not have fucking knocked on my door for that sort of validation.

“He replied.”

Will passed him the letter, and after Charlie read it, he passed it to Freddie. There was a curt exchanging of looks with varied expressions, from grim to confused, followed by a silence that felt oddly stretched.

“I think we need to go to the police about this,” he said slowly.

“It’s just a crazy,” Freddie said. She didn’t sound so convinced.

“If so, it’s a good rendition of crazy. What kind of riddle is that?” Charlie leaned back in his
chair, lit a cigarette. Will’s fingers twitched with the urge to pat down his jacket for his own.

“It’s from The Hobbit,” he said. After glances of mild amusement, he added, “We read it in high school.”

“So what’s the answer?” Freddie asked, lips curling into a Cheshire grin.

“Time.” A beat. “I think he’s saying where I’ll find the body…if I’m fast, maybe they’ll be alive.”

“You think this is a real killer, kid?” Charlie asked skeptically.

“I think it sounds serious enough to give it some attention. We should…maybe call the police.”

“The police will take it and get in our hair,” Freddie protested. “If it’s true, we won’t get the first scoop since they’ll take it out from under us!”

“Someone could be in danger,” said Will.

“You don’t sound so scared, though,” Charlie replied.

“No police,” Freddie urged. She sat forward, pinning Charlie with a look that said she had a marvelous idea. “Charlie, we’ve got this. Hobbs is dead, we need a good top half for next week, right? We send Will out, he maybe saves the day, we get front page news: Will Intentions saves the life of X by figuring out the riddle of a killer.”

“Then the police come in and ask how we knew about a potential murder and said nothing,” Will pointed out.

“We don’t know if it’s real until we look into it,” Freddie retorted. “That’s called investigative journalism, Willy.”

Will hated being called Willy. His watch beeped to tell him he hadn’t taken many steps that day.

Charlie considered the two of them, cigarette spewing smoke that floated just over his head like a dank, murderous fog. He rolled it around his lips, thought, then nodded, leaning forward.

“Here’s what we’ll do: Will, look into it. You’ve got three days, then we see what happens. If you save the day, we have front page news, too. You don’t, we go to the cops, still get front page news since we found the body first.”

Will wasn’t so sure that was an ethically sound idea, but work was work. He thought of the taunt, the question about murder being his muse.

“If you can’t, I’ll do it for you?” Freddie offered.

“I’ll do it,” he replied, nearly bowling over her question. Fuck if he’d let Freddie Lounds steal from him.

He looked up popular clocks in DC, focusing on the answer being time. The first was a clock at the naval base, but that was a no-go. Even if the person was there, he’d never be allowed in to look at it. The next was a new clock being built just across town, but with the construction Will wasn’t convinced that a serial killer would be able to get a body in there without being seen.
By day three, he was just nervous enough to ask Beverly to hunt with him, google maps for places of interest his tool as they hiked all over DC. His watch beeped to congratulate him on the amount of steps he’d taken. A record-breaking step count, it said.

“Did you check Georgetown?” Beverly asked.

“What?” Will looked up from his phone. “Georgetown?”

“They have that huge clock tower on campus,” she said. “The Healy Hall Clock Tower whose hands keep getting stolen; I did an article on it once.”

He took an Uber since he didn’t feel like going back across town on foot, no matter what his watch said about steps.

“What do you think you’re going to find?” she asked, following him on campus. Early fall played with the leaves overhead, threatening to dump them every which way. Between classes, gaits varying from harried to lax and meandering, students roamed the sidewalks and streets, their voices loud and coalescing. It reminded Will of his days at GWU, when everything seemed to feel so exciting, like he was on the edge of something great.

Then he graduated and got to see just how monotonously boring life could really be.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “A prank, probably? It’s gotta be a prank.”

He didn’t think it was, though. There was something about the detached, mocking tone that made him just nervous enough to care.

“I could see Freddie doing it as some roundabout way of welcoming you off of back page,” Beverly said with a laugh. She skirted a biker whose speed was just fast enough to be dangerous and caught up with him. “I mean, they mentioned you almost getting fired. That’s some personal stuff.”

“…Yeah,” Will grunted. When they reached the tower, he looked up at the clock face with its dark stone and golden bronze etching, his stance shifting from foot to foot as he considered it. “I think it’d be inside.”

“How are you getting in there?” she asked. “They’re pretty strict since the hands keep getting stolen.”

“Investigative journalism,” he muttered savagely.

It wasn’t too difficult to get in there. When they climbed enough stairs and went through enough maintenance rooms, the door to the actual back of the clock face was unlocked. That in itself, for a clock face whose hands kept getting stolen, was enough to make Will a little nervous. His hands tingled as he opened the door and walked in, the room cool and dark. He blinked the shadows from his eyes, Beverly close behind him, and he used his phone to make a flashlight, looking around for some kind of switch.

“Got it,” Beverly said, turning a light on.

As his eyes adjusted, he stared up at the manmade chrysalis hanging overhead with a body inside, and he wasn’t ashamed to admit that he most certainly dropped his phone in shock.

“Got it,” he repeated weakly.

Thankfully, Beverly managed to snap a photo for him.
The victim was Hannah Oberly, who’d been put into a diabetic coma and was on a rather fast track to death if Will hadn’t found her in time. As she lay dazed in her hospital bed, she admitted to Will, then to police officers that she honestly couldn’t remember what happened to her. One moment she was watching TV, the next she was waking up as Will administered the insulin that sat just at the bottom of her chrysalis, teasing in its closeness but inability to save her without the aid of another. She’d faded in and out of consciousness after, while he held her and waited for paramedics to rush her to the hospital. Her skin felt clammy, like the flesh of uncooked chicken left out on the counter for too long. He’d held it tight, marveling at the feel against his fingertips.

How had he known the insulin would save her rather than kill her, police asked? Fuck if Will knew. He had a hunch.

They took his prints in case his hunch was something more than just a hunch. His fingers still tingled from the feeling of her skin as she hovered between life and death.

In the hospital hallway he paced, but it was with guilt that he realized it wasn’t fear for her life. Hannah Oberly was safe, and police were investigating. No, no, he was almost–almost–ashamed to admit that his pacing was from adrenaline, from a short burst of excitement that lingered long after paramedics whisked her away to administer intravenous fluids and balance the glucose in her system.

He’d saved someone. The Chesapeake Ripper gave him a riddle, a timeline, and he’d saved someone.

He supposed that said a lot about him, that he felt such eagerness in the face of someone else’s potential demise. Psychopathic tendencies? No, no, he very much felt her fear, palpable and thick on his tongue like he’d dragged it through butter. He felt bad for her. He couldn’t imagine himself doing that to someone, drugging them and wrapping them up in a grotesque display of paper mache in order to lead someone through DC on a manhunt to save their life.

And yet, he could. He could very much imagine it.

He comforted himself with the reality that that said far more about his mind than it did him. Will Graham was unique in a way that he didn’t much like sharing with anyone—their frailties, failings, and realities falling into the cracks of his mind and nestling in, making his thoughts worse off in the aftermath. He could imagine wrapping her tenderly into a pupa of his own making, much the same way he could imagine the tentative grasp on reality he’d have if he came to under the administration of a stranger dosing him with life-saving medicine.

He called Freddie because he promised to keep her updated. Due to his position as her savior, Hannah was persuaded to share a few words with an eager Freddie Lounds before police came back into the room and kicked the two of them out.

Charlie didn’t let him post the entire letter due to the nature of far too much information about his personal life and his work, but they did post the bits that would entice readers:

*Analysis; is that not the best sort of game? I give you clues, you try to find where the bodies are. Easy as pie, I’m told. If you’re quick enough, maybe you could save a few lives in the process. I think you’re going to enjoy what’s next. I’ll give you a little warm-up.*
This thing all things devour:

Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;

Gnaws iron, bites steel;

Grinds hard stones to meal;

Slays kings, ruins town,

And beats high mountains down.

You have 3 days -Avid Fan

With Hannah Oberly safe and relatively sound in a hospital, Will was more than happy to post a reply.

Avid Fan,

_The Hobbit_? Hannah Oberly was found in the Healy Hall Clock Tower, time both her keeper and her enemy. I found the diabetic coma to be somewhat tasteless, but readers will be happy to know that she’s alive, well, and safe.

The police are investigating you, but I’m sure that’s exactly what you wanted. There’s something about the way you signed _avid_ that tells me you’re aspiring for the sort of attention that will bring infamy, at the very least. The questions other readers send will be on how best to protect themselves against someone like you, and I look forward to giving my insight to keep the public safe.

A little ham-handed and snarky, but Will thought utmost honest was best.

The Chesapeake Ripper didn’t like him for his flowery descriptions of trellises, after all.

Dear Will, Why do you think a person with intrusive thoughts would kill? Is it a temporary delusion, or are some people just born wanting to kill people? -Cindy

He thought that question was fitting to follow-up the Chesapeake Ripper’s.

Cindy,

To say that someone is born wanting to kill people would be to say that an infant with no life experience is born unlike anyone else. To be sure, children are victims of their upbringing, just as infants can be born addicted to meth, caffeine, or nicotine due to the foolishness of the one carrying them to term. What you refer to is something different, though, something that represents the way a person looks at the world.

Some people are born without empathy, without the ability to care for another person on a level that creates connections and healthy relationships. Does that make them criminal? No. It is not how they see the world that makes them criminal, but what they do in the face of such thoughts. That’s different from delusion–anyone can suffer delusions. Anyone can suffer from intrusive thoughts.

Most people suffering delusions on a psychotic scale generally only commit violence in moments of extreme duress, when they think it is the only option. On a psychopathic scale, it is a methodical act, a necessity to complete a fantasy that they have lived in their heads. That tends to stem not from some singular, one moment, but from repeated moments of abuse, neglect, or trauma. It grows, escalates. Serial killers are not called such because they only kill once and create their fantasy. They
are called that because they have the impulse to recreate the fantasy over, and over, and over again, escalating it to relive the rush of emotion from that first intimate act.

Do I think some people are born ‘just wanting to kill people’? Not in the least. It is a learned thing, an environmental thing, I was born with an aversion to carrots, but I don’t kill carrot farmers.

They made the font .3 smaller so that they could keep the carrot farmer crack. Will wondered what the Chesapeake Ripper would think about that.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your interest and support of this, guys! :) You're the best!

I feel like this fic will actually make a lot of random writing references that we as general reading/writing group can appreciate because in this story, he will struggle as we do to try and make something that readers will enjoy while also bemoaning writer's block and all of its curses.

Thank you again for being so supportive and lovely! <3
Chapter 3:

*Editor's Choice*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tattler Special: Will of ‘Will Intentions’ Saves Life of Reader Through Use of Clues Sent From ‘Avid Fan’

Tattler Reporter Withholds Evidence That Almost Cost Innocent Woman Her Life

FBI Investigates Withholding of Evidence in Avid Fan Case

New Column in Tattler News Breeding Ground for Psychopaths?

Will thought that maybe their lapse in judgement could have cost ratings, but Charlie was right: serial killers sold. Serial killers, when coupled with scandal, sex, conspiracy, death, or intrigue, sold even more. The more other newspapers tried to report on him, the more popular Tattler News became –more importantly, the more popular Will Intentions became. Job security at its finest, he supposed.

Jack Crawford certainly didn’t feel the same. He intercepted Will before he could go into work, sunglasses, trench coat and all.

“I already spoke with your boss. You’re not in trouble,” he said.

“I know.”

“Walk with me, Mr. Graham.”

Will walked with him because it was better than walking into work and trying to explain why an FBI Agent was keeping him from firing up his computer to get to work on his column. Although readily able to gain the impressions of feelings from everyone in the room, Will Graham wasn’t exactly versed in smoothing over said emotions.

They found a place to sit at a small, haphazard attempt at a park. It boasted a questionable swing-set and a water fountain. A few trees, river birches he supposed, hung over their aged, sad bench and provided shade. He scuffed a foot on the ground and watched one of the swings sway in the breeze, rust at the hinges. He mirrored its movements with a lazily swinging leg.

“Did it occur to you to call me after you saw that letter?”

“I wasn’t sure if it was serious,” Will said. “I took it to my boss, and he said we should look into it first.”

“You didn’t call me after, though,” Jack pointed out.

“Nope,” Will agreed.

Jack let the silence hang suspended over them, and Will was content with it. His watch beeped to inform him that if he wasn’t sitting down at his desk, he was late. He tapped the notification absentmindedly.
“Do you have the note with you?”

“I have a picture.”

The picture of the first note on his phone was produced, and he zoomed in so that Jack could see it. While Jack read the note, Will continued to swing one of his feet in time with the swing, lazy sways that creaked with his joints. He needed to stretch more.

“Obviously we’re investigating this,” Jack said slowly. He sounded on the verge of saying something nasty. “You didn’t put in the papers that it’s the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“My boss wanted to sit on that news for a little bit.”

“Oh, he wanted to sit on it, did he?”

“Well, it’s not the Chesapeake Ripper’s M.O., is it?” Will asked off-handedly. “He mutilates his victims, and he takes trophies.”

“So you’ve read about him,” said Jack. He had the sort of aura that made Will nervous. He wondered if there was an app that could help relieve something like that. He saw Jack as the readily aggressive type when he was on the trail to something, jaw set and eyes narrowed.

“After he signed the first note, I read about him.” Will’s leg continued to scuff and swing, making small, mindless designs in the dirt. “Nine victims, eight bodies, organs as surgical trophies after mutilation, artistic depictions of seemingly random scenes of art. You guys don’t have a lot.”

“I’ve never liked reporters,” Jack said curtly. Bluntly. Will blinked, adjusting his glasses so that they rested straight on his nose.

“Okay.”

“You constantly get in the way of ongoing investigations, you’re nosy, you’re troublesome, and half of the time I’ve found enough DNA from reporters alone to contaminate twelve crime scenes from here to Quantico,” he continued on, unheeding of Will’s unoffended posture. Will continued to swing his leg.

“I think it’s just someone using his name to get attention,” said Will when Jack didn’t continue his tirade. “That’s why I didn’t post the name. Unnecessary panic and giving credit where credit wasn’t due.”

Jack had to give him that. He growled something low in his throat, rubbed his face in his hands. “Right.”

“I saw some pictures, and this isn’t that. Even if it is the Chesapeake Ripper, it’s something else.”

“Some pictures told you that?”

“Some pictures told me Hobbs had a daughter.”

Jack had to give him that, too. He mulled his words around, considering Will with a dubious expression borderlining on mild aggression.

“You’ve gotten a lot of shit from Freddie Lounds,” Will tacked on. “I didn’t recognize your name until I saw it typed on your business card, but I remember it from a lot of her articles on crimes
and the involvement of the FBI. She doesn’t give you a glowing reference.”

“Freddie Lounds,” Jack cursed.

“She’s a pain in my ass, too.” If he was trying to find some common ground, he’d succeeded. Will saw Jack’s shoulders lessen somewhat in tension. He was listening. “I know you think I was just going for ratings, but really I was just trying to help whoever he’d potentially grabbed.”

It was a funny thing, lying. Will was about as well-versed in it as he was in writing, which was to say that given the right incentive, he was very, very good.

“You entertaining this person –Chesapeake Ripper or not –is going to make him want to continue,” Jack said slowly.

“He was going to whether or not I replied. His tone alone shows the uncomfortable arrogance of a person that does what he wants no matter the audience.”

“Oh, you analyzed that too, did you?” Jack asked snidely.

“Yes.”

He stopped swinging his leg when a kid hopped onto the swing and started pumping their legs, throwing themselves into the motions with wild abandon. It threw him out of the loop, and he blinked at the swing, dejected. He tapped the tip of his shoe on the ground, agitated.

“This becomes my jurisdiction rather than the police, since it’s the Chesapeake Ripper,” Jack said. “I’d really appreciate your full cooperation, Mr. Graham.”

“It won’t stop me from writing articles about it,” Will replied.

“If it’s-”

“It’s not impeding investigation if I cooperate with you. The people deserve to know, and I have an amendment that says I can keep them informed while still helping you out.” Among other things, like keeping ratings up and shoving it to Freddie Lounds. He wasn’t sure if it was healthy that a mutual distaste for Freddie made him feel a small sense of camaraderie to Jack Crawford.

Friendships had bloomed on stonier ground, he figured.

“He sends a letter again, I’m the first to know,” Jack said. “You still have my card?”

“Pinned to my corkboard,” Will promised. Right next to the two letters, the two columns, and the gold star.

“I hate reporters,” Jack said, like he was still ruminating on Will’s ability to have his cake and eat it, too.

Jack left him on the park bench, and Will idled for a small while, watching the kid. Their mother sat on an equally dismal park bench just across from his, and he noted her Nike kicks and classy joggers. He wondered, if he had his notebook, if he could have written the sort of description that gave her the sense of wealth and refinement, of one that wore active-wear but didn’t bother with activity. Why work out when one could merely live off of wheat-grass and protein smoothies to stay thin? Maybe he’d just flounder with the words, scratching most of them out before he ultimately gave up. Words that stumbled and ultimately stuck together, clammy and far too much of a mouthful for a reader to digest. Writer’s block and all.
Are serial killers your muse?

He was distracted from his suppositions of just how he’d describe the heather-grey of the woman’s joggers by a phone call, and he answered without looking at the number, managing a distant, vague “Hello?”

“Am I distracting you from your thoughts, Mr. Graham?”

It was a cultured, accented voice, peppered with amusement and a hint of clever edges. Will sat up from his slumped posture and cracked his back, pulling the phone away to look at the number. Restricted.

“Who is this?”

“I thought your response in your column aptly fitting; you have a way with editing my words while still maintaining my tone and identity. I thought to write again, but after the girl was found I assumed correctly that the FBI would hunt you down, much the way they did after your words led them to Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

“Fuck,” Will breathed. His grip tightened on his phone, and he looked about, standing up with toes rapidly growing cold. “You’re joking.”

“My humor doesn’t fall to such designs as prank calls.”

“Alright, what does the inside of my apartment look like?” No one loitered in the small, desolate park save the child and her distant mother. On the sidewalk, swarms of people moved about their day-to-day business, early morning hours keeping their steps quick and harried so that they were on time. A distant beep informed him it was time for a cup of water –coffee if he’d not gotten enough at home. He was out of sync with his watch. The thought didn’t sit well.

“As dour as the outside, with faded taupe walls, no decorations save a corkboard that sat blank until your debut—a formal congratulations, by the way—and a couch abused by the claws of an animal that you don’t own. Your laptop sat closed until I opened it. Most laptop users don’t bother with powering down their electronics, but you do. I thought it an interesting but subtle insight to your character.”

“You’re not the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will said slowly. He strained his ears for any sound on the other end, but it was silent, like the caller sat in a room of nothing but him and the air around him.

“Oh, but I am. My first confession.”

“What did I use to save Hannah Oberly?” he challenged.

“You used the insulin at the base of the pupa I placed her in in order to save her life, although it didn’t revive her in her entirety. I used a reef knot for her hands and her feet, not because she was in any position to escape, but because I wanted to regale you now with the fact.”

“…What can I do for you, then?” Will wet his lips, wandered towards the sidewalk, neck craning. Too many people on their cellphones. Too much noise for any of them to be him. He supposed that he should be scared, being on the phone with an alleged serial killer, but truth be told his heart’s rapid skipping was excitement, not fear.

“It’s not what you can do for me, but what I’ve already been able to do for you.”

“Oh?”
“You were stagnant, prone to living within fantasies constructed in your mind rather than living in your present moment. You resent your dull, obtuse career, the rut you’ve already fallen into at only twenty-six years of age. Stuck on back page news, writing about marriages between people you neither care for nor love. Was this what you’d gone to school for, Mr. Graham? Was this what made you love writing? Or did writing alleviate the way you could look at a person and see their innermost thoughts, their secrets hidden so well you’d either need to be a psychic or remarkably clever and imaginative? Did writing dull the frantic hisses building in the darker recesses of your mind?

“You were two years away from suicide, I’d wager. Six months away from alcoholism.”

“I wasn’t aware you were the charitable type to help with cases like that.”

“I’m offering you a game, as I said before. Something to excite you, something to make you stretch the muscle behind your eyes that you’ve let sit fat and useless for too long. I’m also offering job security, since you’re so prolific at thinking about killers.”

He’d sounded half a breath away from saying ‘killing’ rather than ‘killers’.

“Why me?” he asked. “There are handfuls of others that’d probably bear your attention with far more grace than I can. Ask anyone.”

“Yes, I saw your unfortunate conversation with Agent Crawford. You don’t bear the attention of many people very well, same as you don’t bear the attention of time the way others can. Tell me, do you program your watch to tell you when it’s appropriate to laugh? To cry? Does it take you very long to find the right emotion to attach to the right situation?”

Fuck, he could see right through him, couldn’t he? Will looked up at the damned buildings surrounding them, the many windows –he didn’t want many, though, there was just one, one where the Chesapeake Ripper lurked and taunted him.

“Then you could see why I wouldn’t be the most entertaining victim,” Will said. Too many windows. Too many fucking windows.

“I don’t want you to be a victim, Will Graham,” he said, amusement coloring his tone. “I want to be your friend.”

There. The sound of a door closing, the babble of voices. Will spun, buffeted by the crowds of people around him, and when an ice cream truck’s music trickled in through the ear piece, he spun around again, tracking its movements through the street. The image burned into his eyes, left tires spinning, spinning, spinning.

“My friend,” he prompted, shoving his way through the people. At the crosswalk, he started without waiting for the walk sign, and he narrowly avoided a motorcycle that whizzed by, the driver flipping him the bird. It didn’t matter, though. The ice cream truck was driving away, the sound fading, voices crackling through the earpiece to him.

“Is that a novel concept for you? Are connections so foreign a thing?”

“Sending me riddles where people could die isn’t really a solid basis of friendship,” he pointed out. Someone pushed him out of their way when he paused, ears straining.

“Of course it is. For people like us, it takes far more than a simple hello.”

A horn honked through the earpiece, and he tracked the car that made the noise with his eyes.
He followed it, feet picking up, eyes pinned to the building that opened up to an alley where noise echoed, bounced. He had him. He fucking had him.

“People like us?”

“You can claim a moral high ground all you like, but this is the most exciting thing that’s happened to you in years. Good bye, Mr. Graham. We’ll talk soon.”

Will rounded the corner into the alley, just as he saw someone at the other end disappear. He hung up and ran, jumping over a broken crate of what he suspected to be rotting tomatoes, dodged a homeless man that tried to stick his leg out to trip him, his blood singing in his ears as he reached the end and whipped around the corner.

To no one there.

Rather, too many people were there. It was another sidewalk on the other side of the building that led towards a small pond where ducks harassed bench squatters for food, and food trucks sidled up to prepare for an early morning breakfast rush. No one ran, apart from joggers. No one looked particularly suspicious or gleeful. Someone brushed past his shoulder, a middle-aged woman with an executive haircut, and the look she cast him could have melted butter at daring to get in her way.

Will let out a shaky sigh, tucking his phone into his pocket. His watch buzzed with a notification from Beverly asking where he was, and he angrily slid the envelope icon off of the screen. The Chesapeake Ripper had gotten away.

On his way back through the alley, he looked down at the homeless man and scowled. “Did he pay you to trip me?”

“He didn’t pay me to let you get him, that’s for damn sure,” the man said with a grin.

“What’d he look like?”

“Fuck you,” the man retorted. He stood, adjusted worn, fraying pants, then sidled around Will and shambled down out of the alley, muttering to himself.

Will headed to work, trying to ignore the way his pulse pounded just under his eye, pushing the Chesapeake Ripper’s words further and further into his skull to rot.

This is the most exciting thing that’s happened to you in years.

-

He didn’t tell Agent Crawford, however; when the next note turned up a week later, amidst concerned writers and angry moms, he sat down once more in Charlie’s office and stewed over it, breaking down to light his own cigarette and bask in the stench of clove and smoke.

Dear Will,

Your readers will surely relish your insight to my psyche, as much as they enjoyed seeing you delve into the Minnesota Shrike’s. Truly, the masses revel in a good witch hunt, much the same way they enjoy reading about death and torture until they’re part of it. Be careful, though; don’t have too much faith in your readers. They will only love you so long as you prove to be a safe form of enjoyment, something that entertains with ease in the comfort of their homes.

This one is only mildly harder, but I think we need to take things slowly, really work your
muscles at a gradual incline. Too much, and I fear you’ll quit from the effort. We don’t want that, not now that we’re getting started.

The man who invented it doesn’t want it.

The man who buys it doesn’t need it.

The man who needs it doesn’t know it.

You have three days.

-Avid Fan

“A coffin,” Will said, watching Charlie. His boss stamped out the butt of his cigarette and eyed Will, rubbing the stubble from a spot he’d missed on his chin.

“That Agent Crawford wants me to call him on these things,” Charlie said. “He threatened some kind of bull shit about obstruction of justice. Threatened to put my ass up in miles of paperwork”

“I don’t know if he just wants me to see this place, or if there’s someone there,” Will pointed out. He considered telling Charlie about the phone call, considered against it. If he did, he’d have to tell Agent Crawford, then he’d find himself in protective custody faster than he could say “Chesapeake Ripper”.

He couldn’t get locked up; not now that they were getting started.

“So we go find this place, you give the call if something’s wrong?” Charlie asked. “What kind of other things you looking to post on this column? Ratings still look good, and there’s not enough backlash to even consider pulling. It’s as popular as Chats With Bev.”

“They want to know why I investigated rather than going to the police. I’ll answer that, first.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Charlie agreed.

“Someone asked if I’d continue posting the notes if the Avid Fan sent again, and I thought to mention utmost cooperation with the police.”

“Good, yeah.”

“Someone asked if I thought more kidnappings or killings would occur because of this.”

Charlie frowned and mulled over the question. He tapped another cigarette out of the box and let Will light it for him.

“No. Something else. We’re not doing no god damn self-fulfilling prophecies; they want to blame us for some psycho, they can go read US Weekly or something.” An idle threat, since US Weekly tended to be far more popular than Tattler News.

Will nodded, stubbed out his own cigarette. When his watch beeped, he stood up and got more water from the sun-abused water cooler, sipping down the stagnant taste.

“Should I look into it?” Will asked when he didn’t say anything. Despite the low, nonchalant level of his tone, he was uncertain in the face of his own excitement. It made his palms tingle.

“You got three days, kid. I say, look into it.”
There were a lot of coffin makers and funeral homes in the DC area. So many that by the third day, the excitement to find and the eagerness of the hunt was sore leaving him, watch beeping periodically to commend him on his steps. He’d walked so many god damn steps. He adjusted the notifications on his phone to increase reminders for water to better combat all of the moving around that he was doing.

He thought a lot about the phone call, how the Chesapeake Ripper was simply trying to give him something to do because he wanted to be friends.

Had they met before? A brief moment, an interaction? He’d tried to find ways to lurk about the break room, listen to the cadences of his co-workers, but there was no way to eavesdrop on all of Tattler News. The voice was posh, cultured, far too sophisticated for their brand of tawdry work. Besides, he wouldn’t risk it if he thought Will would be able to find him so soon.

Not when they were just getting started.

He walked into a funeral home, dejected, looking more for a place to sit than anything else. Funeral homes were odd to him, a clash of faux sophistication in the face of grief, a delicate veneer of poise coupled with the sobbing sounds of the mourning. The walls of them ran with emotions too high to handle, leaving him often short of breath.

“Hello?” he called out when no one greeted him. Music played in the adjoining room, the wake room he realized as he stepped in to look around. Satin wraps were tied around chairs with thick cushions and metal backs, and the smell of Iris and Calla Lilies clogged his breath. On display, a coffin of spectacular make rested, polished burgundy with gold etchings of filigree along the sides and down the top. A small, quaint stereo reminiscent of the 90’s played soothing piano, and when he reached the front where it rested, he turned it off and looked around, disquieted by the lack of bodies and sudden lack of noise.

“No…” he called out when no one greeted him. Music played in the adjoining room, the wake room he realized as he stepped in to look around. Satin wraps were tied around chairs with thick cushions and metal backs, and the smell of Iris and Calla Lilies clogged his breath. On display, a coffin of spectacular make rested, polished burgundy with gold etchings of filigree along the sides and down the top. A small, quaint stereo reminiscent of the 90’s played soothing piano, and when he reached the front where it rested, he turned it off and looked around, disquieted by the lack of bodies and sudden lack of noise.

“Hello?”

No one. He moved to leave, but it was then that there was a faint, feeble thump from the coffin beside him. He gave a start, turning towards it with a quiet yelp. His skin crawled, and when the thump came again he reached out and grabbed the latch, shaking, stupid fingers fumbling with it before he was able to throw it open, covering his nose at the smell that hit him.

“Help…please…” the man wheezed, and Will gagged, the hot stench of manure dank as it blended with the flowers already permeating the air. His fingers stuttered over his phone, but he managed the call to 911 and sank back into one of the chairs, stammering out the address to the place to a confused but calm dispatcher.

From that angle, the hand lifting from the coffin was bleak, threatening, like he’d ripped himself from the earth within to claw his way out.

“Please,” he called out again, and Will dropped the phone, cursing himself. Of course, yes, the person, the person, Will.

“Hang on, hang on,” he said, and he brushed the earth, warm in its coffin confines, away from the man’s face, weak from lack of air, food, or water. His eyes roved, listless, and Will helped him up, hissing out a breath of shock as worms fell with the earth, ugly and wriggling as they tried to dive back in.
He cursed and hauled the man up and out of the coffin, falling back with him onto the ground and wheezing out a breath. His skin, unlike Hannah Oberly’s, was warm and an odd sort of damp from the earth. From a short distance, he heard the voice of the dispatcher crackling through his phone, telling him to hang on; everything was going to be alright.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so stoked to see the feedback on this guy! Your comments have made me so excited to really get this show on the road (as if coffin guy isn't getting the show on the road). Definitely because of writer's block, I feel like I can relate to a poor Will Graham that stumbles on descriptors. It makes this a bit more personal of a work in that way :)

Today is August 1st, so check out my Tumblr for new, exciting changes to come!
Chapter 4:

He sat in a small room in Quantico, dismissing the notification on his watch that he should have eaten already. He stared down at the photos of Hannah Oberly and now Russel Stevens, then considered Crawford across from him. Jack said nothing, merely stared. Will sighed and looked back down at the pictures obediently. Spying one that seared against his vision, he reached out and tapped the photo thoughtfully.

“Was he hoping the worms would break him down after dying?” Will wondered. “In case no one found him in time?”

Jack let out an irritable grunt, disgusted.

“I called you after I made sure he was alive,” Will added on. “And I even took the note with me so that you could see.”

“You should have called me the moment you found the note,” he snapped.

“Am I being held officially?”

“I’m thinking about charging you with obstruction of justice,” he snapped, steepling his fingers. He considered Will over them, brow lowered darkly. “Does the fact that he could have died mean anything to you?”

“He’s going to be okay,” Will reassured him.

“Traumatized,” Jack corrected.

“Appreciative,” Will countered.

They glared at one another across the table.

“We’re keeping the note, and since we already have your prints on file, we’re taking DNA, too.”

“That’s fine.” Will had already photocopied the note, expecting something much like that.

“You do this again, Mr. Graham, I’ll get so many gag orders and lawyers up your ass that you won’t know how to sit right for years,” he warned. It was reminiscent of what he’d threatened Charlie with.

“Do you want the other notes, too? They’re at my apartment.”

“Much as you’ve probably contaminated them, yes.”

Will had photocopied those too. He wished he could have figured out what brand of fountain pen the Chesapeake Ripper used, just so he could have traced over the curls and loops of his handwriting, learned something about him in the way he dotted his I’s, but he’d run out of time for that. If The Ripper called again, maybe he’d remember to ask.
“Can I ask a question, off the record?” he asked as he signed a paper with his statement.

“Is it really off the record?” Jack asked.

“I’m not Freddie Lounds,” Will retorted.

Jack nodded, that flicker of comradery in his eyes as he looked at Will. Will liked knowing that there was someone else in the world not affiliated with him in a bias way that hated her, too. Maybe in another life, he’d be on the same side of the table as Jack was. He could see it, a specially bred dog made for hunting psychos, reporting back to get a pat on the head before being locked in the kennels till the next one came out to play.

“Did he take anything from them? Not for reporting – like I said, I’m keeping this out of the news. For now.” He emphasized ‘for now’ with a pointed look. “The Chesapeake Ripper took organs, but these two lived. He found ways to put them under; are they missing anything…vital?”

Jack Crawford would have been a terrible poker player, what with the way expression ranged across his face, first surprised, then horrified, and finally resigned. Even before he answered, Will knew. “Oberly is missing a kidney, and so is Stevens.” A long, pointed stare. “Off the record.”

“Off the record,” Will swore.

He took a taxi back to DC, fingers drumming along his knee as he stewed on that. Both times trophies, but trophies one could live without. Why did he choose them? Did he find a riddle on the internet, deem it clever, then find someone that fit the type? Or did he first see a person and find inspiration in their ways, their mannerisms?

He highly doubted it was as easy as that. The Chesapeake Ripper was methodical, precise. He chose Will, somehow knowing that Will would rather play games with him than turn everything into the FBI and disappear until everything blew over.

Which begged the question: why the fuck wasn’t he doing exactly that?

He huffed out a quiet breath, glancing down to his watch when it beeped. A message from Beverly asking if he’d survived the FBI. In a manner of speaking, yes. In a manner of speaking, no. He was more than aware what was normal, what was right. He was supposed to turn everything in, duck his head and write his column from the confines of a rather safe and secluded place of the FBI’s choosing. He would inform them of any phone calls or contact, let someone with a degree and specialty in psychopaths handle everything.

You were two years away from suicide, I’d wager. Six months away from alcoholism.

He didn’t like the aftertaste of considering that, though. With the way he’d leapt at the chance to go on a hunt for clock towers and funeral homes, there was a subconscious part of him that’d decided from the start that he was going to do this, regardless of the danger.

More than likely because of the danger.

Your readers will surely relish your insight to my psyche, as much as they enjoyed seeing you delve into the Minnesota Shrike’s. Truly, the masses revel in a good witch hunt, much the same way they enjoy reading about death and torture until they’re part of it.

This one is only mildly harder.
The man who invented it doesn’t want it.
The man who buys it doesn’t need it.
The man who needs it doesn’t know it.
You have three days.
-Avid Fan

Will sat slumped on Beverly’s couch, editing and stewing over replies, her laptop propped up onto his chest. Using someone else’s computer was a personal affair, he felt, the keys foreign and oblong to him. The faded spaces didn’t fit his thumbs right, and they hovered over the spacebar, hesitant. He’d needed the change in atmosphere, though. He had a reminder on his watch to beep to let him know to change scenery every once in a while.

“It’s a good thing they’ve got Lounds collaborating, otherwise people would think you were making this shit up,” Beverly said, munching on kale chips. She offered one to him, and Will accepted it, letting it hang out of his mouth as he tapped idly on the faded ‘A’ key, nodding.

“We’re writers and we couldn’t make this up,” he mumbled around the chip.

“Shit, you’re on the news!” He gave a start at her shout, and he slid the laptop down just enough to look at the television, blinking rapidly at the mildly grainy image of a camera marking him coming out of the funeral home with Stevens strapped to a gurney. Thankfully, the distortion made him appear ruffled, uncertain of himself as a police officer led him towards cars where he folded his arms tight around his chest, rocking from toe to heel—at the time, the leaping of awareness from vein to artery to capillary gave him the feeling of a near-ability to fly. He’d wondered absently that if he leapt from a building, if he’d never have to reach the ground.

“An unknown source sent the video in, saying they were longboarding by when they happened upon the chance encounter. This begs the question, though; is this life imitating art, imitating life? Just what are the lines of journalism that credits an almost vigilante-esque behavior? Where does the reporting stop and the police step in?”

“She’s just pissed it’s not happening to her,” Beverly said, grabbing another chip. “Hell, I’m a little jealous.”

“We can trade if you want; the FBI’s up my ass now.”

Beverly looked like she was genuinely considering it. After a breath, she exhaled and shook her head dismally. “No, I saw that answer you gave to the period question. Leave the genuine life advice to me, and you go write about crazies.”

When they brought a behavioral analysist on to discuss the sort of person that would entertain an ‘avid fan’ such as that, Will snatched the remote and muted it. He didn’t need someone on the TV telling him something he was already very much aware of, thank you.

Avid Fan,

With the FBI involved, surely you will begin to feel the heat, now. After the rescue of Russel Stevens, they are certainly keen to keep people safe, especially from people much like you.

To address your behavior as well as answer the question that Lacy4Luk sent in, regarding your personality, I’d say that first impressions tell me you have a wild flare for the dramatic. You were a
child not given much in the way of attention, and that loneliness grew, fostered into something ugly throughout adolescence and finally peaked upon reaching adulthood. You revel in the macabre because you feel you’ve found your niche. You think yourself an artist, and unfortunately, Lacy4Luk, the artistic desires of Avid Fan lend them a monstrous appetite.

This is a person, however, that will not stand out—not because they don’t wish to, but because they’re intelligent enough to see that individuality is well, but too much of it falls under scrutiny. They will be pleasant in public, affable, kind, and one would even argue charmingly charismatic. People will trust them because they make it so easy to trust them. There is an aloofness, however; this is not a person that lets just anyone into their home. Their home is their fortress, and the people that enter it are either being used, or they are very much about to be.

Beverly read it over his shoulder, munching on her chips. The noise was distracting, the bag crackling, and he winced away from it, holding her laptop up as an offering.

“I like that you switch from addressing him to talking to Lacy instead,” she commented. “You’re saying you see him, but you’re just as interested in everyone else.”

“Lacy4Luk,” he corrected.

“You can’t pay me to refer to them as those weird ass names.”

“They do pay you to refer to them as those ‘weird ass names’,” Will retorted with a short laugh. “They pay both of us.”

“We’re not on the clock, though.”

That was true. Why was he working on this outside of work? He wasn’t writing for the daily news that was delivered Monday-Saturday, he was writing for the Sunday Edition, a weekly piece with the ‘best of the best’. He felt like he had to, though. He felt like it would be somewhat of a disservice to Russel Stevens to not. The poor man had been buried alive in one of his own coffins, worms thrown in to help him decompose.

Enough time had passed throughout the day that he could adequately process the horror of it, although it didn’t seem to sink in the way he knew it should.

After enough kale chips, he e-mailed his work to his laptop at the apartment and headed home, watch beeping to let him know he’d reached triple his step goal for the day. He acknowledged the notification, kept walking. Maybe he deserved a cake or something for achieving the unthinkable. Tripling your steps is a pretty big deal, or so he’d heard from their health department.

This is the most exciting thing that’s happened to you in a long time.

The papers hit Sunday, and by Monday he watched his e-mail fill to the brim. Was there a limit to how many people could send in e-mails at once? Would his inbox implode? He absently redid the settings so that his watch didn’t beep every time he got an e-mail. It was so distracting that he almost missed his reminder to go and get a cup of water.

You’re a hero, it’s so amazing how you don’t wait for the police to save people.

The police already has a bad response time, give them a riddle like that and it’s no wonder you didn’t wait for them to go and save him.
Do you think you're real FBI or something? Honestly, this is making me rethink my subscription to Tattler News, that and on the front page Freddie Lounds is always the top half, and I'm tired of her tone, but this is just getting ridiculous now with the whole man hunt thing.

Hi, are you faking these things?

Why is this happening to you? Who is this Avid Fan in correlation to you?

The actual written letters were far better. When people had to write out each letter, they were more careful about what was put down. He thought of his cork board, now with photocopies rather than originals, and he sighed. The Chesapeake Ripper certainly was very careful about each mocking, taunting word that was written. Every single flourish was purposeful, as though he knew Will would later trace it with an almost sort of reverence to the actions as he tried to ingrain the ink into his fingerprints.

As many abrasive questions about the validity of his actions as there were, the ratings inched up just a little bit more. Enough that Charlie was going to keep the column. Enough that despite some of the harsher, accusing statements, there were scores of other letters from his ‘avid fans’.


The bus was broken down, though, and with traffic the way it was, darkness had fallen by the time he managed his walk home, feet furious and watch beeping to congratulate him on his steps that day. It wasn’t fun to walk five miles in dress shoes, no matter the ‘memory foam’ assistance in the sole. Memory foam. Like he wanted shoes that could eat up the memories of sitting on his ass all day under too bright work lights and in front of a computer screen where a woman asked him if ‘he was the ass hole almost killing people, just to get ahead in his career’.

When he went into his apartment, he locked it behind him and flipped the light, letting out a short, aggravated curse when it didn’t work. Power outages were common, although certainly a pain. When he turned to see the shadowed visage of a man, though, it occurred to him that it wasn’t a power outage at all.

His first thought was to unlock his door and run out of it, since that was a logical escape. When he went to move, though, his legs locked and he found himself decidedly frozen, throat dry and mouth gaping open. There was only one person that would find a way to leave them completely in darkness within his own apartment –unless he had a slew of Avid fans, but Will Graham wasn’t that arrogant –and if he’d wanted to kill Will, there was the second thought that he would have attacked when his back was turned, when it was easy to subdue him. Standing poised by his crummy table and his corkboard, Will didn’t think that was the case.

“I can only see your outline, so I’m wondering the thoughts no doubt racing through your head,” the Chesapeake Ripper said. It was the same accented, cultured voice from the phone. In person, it was deeper, a mellow undertone of completely controlled delight.

“I thought about just walking out of my apartment,” Will said, and he had to clear his throat to dispel the dryness. It made him sound hoarse, scared. Truth be told, it wasn’t fear; much like finding Oberly and Stevens, there was a thread of excitement, a whisper of something fantastic that
made his heart skip beats, and he was very well aware of just how messed up that was.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Then I thought, it’s the Chesapeake Ripper; if he wanted to kill me I’d already be dead.”

“Oh?”

“So if you weren’t here to kill me, why would I ruin the chance to have a conversation with you?” Will’s watch beeped, to remind him that he should have eaten dinner already. The sudden light in the dark was blinding, and he quickly swiped the notification away, irritated by it. It made his eyes, adjusting slowly as they were to the dark, blind all over again.

“You haven’t eaten,” the Chesapeake Ripper noted. “You should fix that.”

“I’m not the best at cooking in the dark.”

“Luckily for you, I prepared a dish so that you didn’t have to.”

The Chesapeake Ripper prepared a dish. Will would have laughed at the thought, but even he had his limits. They considered one another, two solid cuts of shadow in the dark, and it occurred to Will that he’d even thought to draw the light-cancelling blinds so that not even the traffic and the busy streets below could interrupt them.

When the Chesapeake Ripper didn’t move, Will headed towards the table, bumping into the chair before he grabbed the back and pulled it out, sitting down. Sure enough, when his hands came to rest on the top, fingertips bumped a fork that skittered to the side. The sound was jarring, unsettling in the otherwise quiet room.

“What is it?” he asked.

“What do you smell?”

Knee-jerk was to suspect him of putting human remains on a plate for him to eat, but as he lowered his head to inhale the aroma, he was surprised to find something savory, spices with a rich hazelnut undertone. Fingers skimmed across the plate, then traced out the odd, oblong shape of a very cooked, very dead bird.

“Hazelnut, fig; I think Armagnac? It’s meat. A bird.”

“Have you ever tasted the Ortolan, Mr. Graham?”

“Is that what this is?” At the prolonged, unanswered silence, he shook his head. “I haven’t.”

“It is quite illegal here, but I have a lovely butcher who finds ways to entertain my palate when the mood strikes me. They claim it is to better capture the aroma that one places a napkin over their head in order to partake, but I for one know it to be that they wish to hide their face from God.”

“If God is omniscient, he would see beneath the napkin,” Will pointed out. The shadow of the Chesapeake Ripper shifted, moved, and he sat down at the table across from him.

“We give them their hopes, such frailties as they are.”

“Is that why you leave the lights off?”

“The lights are off because I want you to be blind, Mr. Graham.”
Right. Will nodded, staring across the distance with eyes straining to see. He could make out broad shoulders, but otherwise there was no distinguishing feature. His fingers twitched near the fork by his plate, urging him to grasp it—to what end?

“I’m going to venture that the bird isn’t poisoned because that would take away the fun,” Will stated. He was proud of the fact that his voice didn’t waver.

“I wouldn’t do that to the food.”

Maybe it was the way he said it, but Will could almost feel his lips curling up on the edges, a sublime joke that only he understood. “You’re eating their kidneys, aren’t you?” he asked, and his voice lowered as he thought of the other trophies from victims. “You’re eating your trophies?”

“And now you will wonder for the rest of the evening if it’s not my intention to kill you after all,” the Chesapeake Ripper said, delighted.

His watch beeped to tell him to drink a glass of water. The sudden light burned his eyes, and he hissed, slapping the notification away, rendering him even blinder than before. He blinked spots out of his vision, focused on the shadowed blob not more than three feet away. So close, yet so obscured he couldn’t see.

“Are you going to eat?” the Chesapeake Ripper asked gently.

“Did you make enough for yourself?”

“I did.” The small scraping sound of a plate on cheap, pressed wood. “Many people enjoy the ease of discussing business over dinner, and I thought it sad to not partake in something as delectable as this.”

“…All in one?” Will asked, passing his tongue along his dry lips.

“All in one, Mr. Graham.”

He grabbed the bird, fingers brushing against what felt like a handful of dried fruits, fingerfoods for ease of consumption in the dark. He’d read a few articles on chefs in France fighting to have the bird made legal to serve in their restaurants again, the shouts of foi gras and other controversial delicacies their platform. The birds had always looked mildly stupid, plucked and served up no larger than a baby’s fist. His lips glided along the skin, and with a quick, short breath, he tilted his head back and dropped it into his mouth, biting down.

It was savory, gamey in its own right. He bit down on flesh cooked just-so, perfection as organs compacted on bone, fragile and brittle. They shattered under the weight of his teeth, fig fresh on his tongue as he swallowed, a salted aftertaste as small bones scraped the back of his mouth and broke flesh. To consume, he took in some of himself, he thought, and if that wasn’t something smacking of darkly romantic and twisted, he didn’t know what was.

Just across from him, the shadowed shape of the Ripper’s face tilted back as he too partook, and there was something grossly intimate about the silence, about the sordid act as they witnessed one another do something that apparently even God would shame.

His fingers poked and pushed the dried fruits—now that he could touch them further, he was more convinced of that—and he stared, weighing. Assessing.

“Worth it?” Will asked.
“Far more revealing about your character than anything I’ve seen you display in a public setting, I assure you,” the Ripper replied. “You didn’t hesitate.”

“I didn’t.”

“And despite the person you’re sitting across from, you’re very much not afraid.”

Will swallowed, savoring the aftertaste of hazelnut coupled with blood. “I’m not.”

“How different from the dour, sad-faced man that you present to others, glasses askew just-so, fingers that dance across the touch screen of a device that determines your every move.” The chair creaked as he shifted, and every sense was alive to it. It was true what they said, that the loss of a sense heightened all others. He swore he could smell the faint cologne of something ridiculously expensive and musky. “You abhor socializing.”

“I do.”

“And yet you can sit across from me rather than run because you’re curious.”

Curious was a good word. So was excited, but Will didn’t want to admit that part. “Others would argue stupid rather than curious.”

“You’re not stupid,” the Ripper replied without hesitation. “In fact, I would argue that in most cases, you’re the smartest man in the room.”

Somehow, coming from him, the compliment smarted as much as it hummed with sincerity. What use was it to Will to have his intelligence validated by the type of person society would rather see dead?

“What now, then?” Will asked. “You didn’t come here just to feed me.”

“I was curious,” the Ripper said, “about what you’d do when faced with a situation in which you were put at a disadvantage.”

“Here we are, two curious people in a dark room.” Will shifted in his chair. “You’re not going to reveal yourself. It’s too soon.”

“Too soon,” the Ripper agreed.

“I do have questions, though.”

The Ripper huffed a laugh, the shadow of his head bobbing in a nod. “I’d imagine so,” he mused.

“Have we met before?”

“Yes.”

“Where?” At the silence, Will pressed, “When?”

“Two years ago, although I’m almost convinced you don’t recall.”

Two years —two years? Will scrambled through his thoughts, people, places, sensations, but nothing rose to mind. He’d been at Tattler News even then, resigning himself to a life of bad writing and bad wedding cake. Even The Ripper took note of it.
“Nothing comes to mind,” he said slowly. “It must have left an impression, though.”

“It did,” the Ripper agreed pleasantly.

He wasn’t going to tell Will, and for that Will was resigned to not press. He didn’t want to be too curious, too pressing to something that the Ripper wasn’t inclined to share. It would look weak, grasping, and it’d waste what little time Will felt he had left.

“Why do you schedule yourself so strictly, Mr. Graham?” the Ripper asked when he didn’t speak. “Why do you make yourself a slave to a laundry list of items on that watch?”

Silence. Will debated lying. He debated smudging the truth a little.

“Quid pro quo: if you are honest with me, I will be honest with you,” the Ripper said.

“If I didn’t, I’d forget to do any of them,” Will said after a moment. “Sometimes when I’m thinking, time moves differently. I’ll wake up, maybe drink some coffee, but I stare at the traffic and next thing I know, it’s 6:00 P.M., and I’ve lost an entire day because of the traffic.”

“What about the traffic moves you?” the Ripper wondered.

“The way the lights cut across windows from the street shops; horns blare overhead, arcing along metal frames housing the curses of the one running late, fists slamming against reinforced plastic, children shrieking as parents race across crosswalks.” He reached up and rubbed away the crease between his brows at the thought. “It’s not just traffic. Little things. The steam rushing from the kettle, the way a person tilts their head as they speak angrily into a phone, the way lips fumble over words they wish they’d never said. I could feel myself bleeding into the world moving around me. I’ve been told by psychiatrists that my mind doesn’t have barriers.”

“You’d become so wrapped up inside of it that you had to create a timeline in which you could function as an adult,” the Ripper realized. “Rather, as what society says what an adult would do.”

“That, and I was tired of food going bad in my fridge because I’d forget about it,” he replied dryly. His mouth worried over his question: quid pro quo. An answer for an answer. “Why are you eating them?”

The Chesapeake Ripper stood, and he circled the table. Will tensed in his chair when he drew close, when gloved hands rested on his shoulders to squeeze, massaging away tensed muscles bunched at being in such close proximity to a murderer. The Ripper’s face lowered, and the tip of his nose traced along the shell of Will’s ear, down to his throat. To Will’s utter surprise, he inhaled deeply, mouth open against his skin like he could consume some aspect of him. It made a shudder curl down his spine, rest warm in his stomach like a fine red wine.

“Because I was hungry,” he murmured against his neck.

“You cannibalize people because you’re hungry?” Will asked skeptically.

“It’s not cannibalism if they’re not equals, Mr. Graham,” he said with utmost seriousness. “And I assure you, they are certainly not our equals.”

He walked out of the apartment, and Will let him. The curious part of him thought to run after with his phone, grab a picture before it was too late, but the darker, more manipulative part of him whispered that it would spoil the fun.
Chapter End Notes

So...there we are :) That happened.

Thank you guys so much for all of your support! This is definitely a fast paced writing -- I just always imagine a journalist type story not slowing down for much of anything because Will just 'has' to get that story.

A special thanks to Emily Elm, Superlurk, Inky_starlight, Matilda, and Duhaunt6! You guys are the best <3
Chapter 5:

He most certainly didn’t tell Jack Crawford or his boss Charlie what he found in his apartment.

Without a note from the Ripper, the column was normal—as normal as questions of analysis on psychopaths and serial killers could be. He ruminated on the mystery of the unsolved ‘Snake River Killer’ in Lewiston, Idaho, and he discussed the fact that the prime suspect lived comfortably somewhere in North Carolina.

Just to be congenial, he even called Crawford to let him know that no ‘Avid Fan’ had written.

Ratings maintained, thankfully. Maybe the Chesapeake Ripper knew that too much was just going to sour the taste in the mouths of readers. Whoever he was, his self-control was one to be marveled at.

The next week, more letters. He stared at the written ones, sifting through them, grabbing each one crafted from plain copier paper and setting them aside to go through first. Whenever he swallowed, he imagined he could still taste the heady flavor of the Ortolan on the back of his tongue, sordid with its questionable mode of death. He imagined he could taste his own blood, too.

He was just working his way through another question regarding whether or not the Avid Fan was going to strike again when another letter was set on his desk, plain in manner and unobtrusive in its size. The mailman didn’t stop to talk to him as he trundled by after delivering it; Will saw it out of the corner of his eye, though, and he dropped the one he was currently reading, snatching it up and ripping the letter open with his heart beginning to pound.

Dear Will,

You’ve become a regular hero, breaking down the aspects of the psychopaths and monsters with ease between breaks to the water cooler and lunch reminders. Does this excite you? Does it make you open your word doc. and stare at the words inside with renewed hope, that if you can gain a small following with nothing more than a few nods towards an understanding of the crazies, perhaps there’s hope for you yet?

I want to see the sort of words you’d use to describe something outside of the comfort zone of your lumbar-supportive chair. Something where you lose, no matter what you do.

What has roots as nobody sees,
Is taller than trees,
Up, up it goes,
And yet never grows?

You have one day.

-Avid Fan
He read it once, twice, three times. Instead of going to Charlie, who would no doubt encourage him to go alone, Will called Jack Crawford, grabbing his lunch as his watch beeped to tell him that it was time to eat.

“I’m cooperating, like I promised,” he said when Jack answered. “Just…take me along with you when you go. No pictures, but… I need to see.”

Jack took him along once he confirmed he had no cameras on his person. There were no mountains in DC, but the Blue Ridge Mountains boasted several beautiful, scenic getaways and parks. It was at one such place the next day that Will found himself staring at the beginning of a mountain trail, his blood cold.

“I’m banking a lot on you not being like Freddie Lounds,” Jack said. On the mountain, they wore somewhat heavier coats to protect against the chill of the early fall, and agents milled about beside forest rangers, trying to establish the boundaries of the crime scene.

Because it was very much a crime scene.

They were hikers—if they weren’t, they were dressed like it. One lay across a boulder beside the beginning of the trail, and if the color of their skin and the amount of blood surrounding them was any indication, they had been drained completely dry. Will had never seen ribs so exposed like that; lungs, heart, and intestines completely missing to show the cavity in all its glory.

The other lay poised over them, strung up by fine wire as they stared out glass-eyed at the nature surrounding them, either oblivious or disregarding the nature of their partner’s woes. They’d have seemed almost the peaceful, unharmed foil to the one laying down, if Agent Price hadn’t removed the beanie on top to reveal a missing brain.

“I’m not Freddie Lounds,” said Will after what he too late realized was a rather long pause. He sighed, tucking his fingers into his jacket. “I promise you that.”

“What the hell are you, then?” Jack wondered, and in the early morning light so high up, the wrinkles on his face were all the more prominent. “What are you that this guy’s writing to you?”

“Hell if I know,” Will replied. He passed the letter with gloved hands back to Jack, his lip curling. “Hell if I even want to know.”

“Mountains,” Price said, coming back from the blood and gore. “Up, up, it goes, yet never grows.” He wore a whimsical plaid hat with thick flaps on the side, and he peered up under the scruff of the bill to survey Will and Jack critically. “You have yourselves a killer with an affinity to Tolkien?”

“He knows I’m a writer, so a writer he uses,” Will said out loud. Rebuked himself for it the moment that it was said.

“Eyes, temperature, stiffening of the rigor mortis place time of death at about seventy-two hours or so ago,” Price continued, looking to Crawford.

“Three days,” Jack mused. “They were moved here?”

“Placement of the blood looks intentional, not the product of him removing organs right here,” Price replied. “He did it somewhere else, brought these babies here to set up a stage.”

Three days. Will frowned, bit the fat of his cheek and shook his head.
“He only gave us one day to find them,” he said, looking to Jack. “He only gave us one day, but he-”

“Clearly intended you to never find them alive,” Jack said, smoothing over his curt words in his mellow baritone. “He’s poking you with a stick, Mr. Graham.”

Will wanted to shout, to argue. His blood was pumping, his breath cut short as he looked back to the bodies. He was only given a day. They were killed three days ago, and he’d only given him a day. How was he supposed to outsmart him when he wasn’t playing fair? How was he supposed to help anyone when he was being hobbled right out of the gate?

A thought wriggled in the back of his mind that it wasn’t outsmarting him when he was giving him the easiest riddles he could find. This wasn’t a game so much as it was a lesson –Will’s fun only extended as far as the Chesapeake Ripper would allow.

“What are you thinking, Graham?” Jack prodded. Will blinked, looked back to Price and Crawford. They’d been talking? Yes, it was apparent in Price’s stance that he’d just been speaking, waiting for a response. Will wondered if there was an app that could remind him to listen and think at the same time.

“He’d know you’re talking to me, working with me,” he said. “It’s in the news, it’s… everywhere. He wants to see what you’ll do next –what I’ll do next.”

“And what are you going to do next, Mr. Reporter?” Price asked. It was as much sing-song as it was serious.

“I said I’d cooperate,” Will said at last, looking from Price to Crawford. “How do you think we should handle this? The news will find out no matter what I do. But if you use me, I can control how some of the news takes it, or at the very least how much they get of it.”

Jack thought on that, and when Will moved closer he wasn’t stopped, although he was jostled by a park ranger that scurried by, mouth pressed to a walkie-talkie. Even if Will kept a lid on things, people would know. The ranger who’d found the bodies would have most likely taken pictures, the one who came to comfort him would have texted a friend, and by the time they’d gotten to the spot, police were struggling to hold back a Channel 5 News Anchor who was dumb enough to bring the cameraman along too.

He didn’t want to get too close, resenting the foul stench of death blending with the crisp scent of the great outdoors –pine needles and a distinct lack of car exhaust. Looking down at the victim so open, so exposed made him think about college, the students that’d cut open cadavers in lab, their hissed whispers as they left loud enough that even he heard. Take out all the organs and see what’s left inside. Gross, right? How open we are without the pieces that keep us alive?

Just at the victim’s wrist, a watch beeped in a very familiar tone. A reminder of an unread text.

Gloved as he was, Will lurched at the sound and grasped her wrist, sliding the jacket up to reveal a smart watch much like his, same model, make, and color. He tapped frantically at the envelope on the screen, and when it opened he let out a shout for Jack, heart racing.

Mary Mai too kept her life organized through her smartphone and a synced watch, Mr. Graham. No one seemed to notice her attachment to the living was only held through such a small device rather than the connections of the people around her.
Jack hauled him back, let him fall onto his ass unceremoniously in a small pile of pine needles and dirt. Jack read the message, then read it again, setting her wrist back down where Will had found it in the blood.

“It was sent from her device,” he barked out, looking around. “I want a search for any nearby devices on this mountain, and I want it done now!”

The agents and police scattered, leaving forensics to their job. Will sat on his ass, stunned, until Price took pity on him and helped him up, brushing something off of his back.

“That was for me,” he rasped to Crawford, staring at his back. “That was to me.”

“What do you have that the Chesapeake Ripper wants, Mr. Graham?” Jack asked, turning around to him.

Will didn’t want to say it, pulse thumping erratically as it was. If he did, he’d be suspect, he’d be locked away, he’d be under scrutiny for the rest of his god damn life. His watch beeped to tell him he should either take a second cup of coffee or his first glass of water at the office, and he jolted, wheezing out a breath. Thankfully, adrenaline and excitement looked much the same physically as fear and anxiety.

“I don’t know,” he lied, and he looked from the body to Jack, shaking his head. “I don’t know, I just…that’s her husband, isn’t it? Mr. Mai?”

“Jack glanced at a report someone handed him, and he nodded. “Rufus Mai, age thirty-seven, married to Mary Mai, aged thirty-nine.”

“He’s saying I…I don’t connect like others do, and no one can see. He took his brain?” A rhetorical question. He glanced to the missing top half of Rufus Mai’s skull, and he nodded. “He wasn’t smart enough to see. He wasn’t…smart enough to see she was detached from him, from their reality.”

“And just how attached are you to this reality, Mr. Graham?” Jack asked.

The watch beeped again, and he distractedly swiped the notification away. “Relatively attached to living and living in reality, Agent Crawford,” he said, glancing down to the body. He didn’t like seeing that it was empty, devoid of the things that made it real and alive.

If that was the Chesapeake Ripper’s estimation of him, things looked rather grave indeed.

The cell phone was found perched precariously on one of the police cars farther down the trail, unlocked and devoid of any fingerprints save what Price dismally said was more than likely Mary Mai’s. The fact that the Ripper had been there, strolling among any loitering or any about on business made Will’s palms tingle, made his heart leap to his throat.

It only served to make Jack kick one of the tires on his car with a furious frenzy that was more than a little nerve-wracking.

He rode back with Jack, the silence one of two minds puzzling over the same problem in different ways. Jack wanted a security detail on him, which he adamantly refused. He wanted to try and use the media to make it seem like more than they had, which Will laughed at. The Chesapeake Ripper would find it not only appalling but laughable, and he’d find another news source to put the spotlight on the FBI’s failures.
He thought about telling Crawford that he ate people, but then he’d have to explain how he’d found out that information. Telling him he’d had a romantic dinner in the dark would only serve to put him under further scrutiny that he was positive he was already under.

“How much are you going to share?”

“I’m not sharing the part with the watch beeping a text,” Will said after a moment of thought. “They should know he’s using timelines with no guarantee of safety, shouldn’t they?”

“You know what I think,” Jack said heavily. “I don’t think you should engage him at all with this. I think he thinks he can get you however he needs, just by dangling a little more recognition and ratings your way, same as any reporter.”

“If it was any reporter, don’t you think he’d have gone to one more famous?” Will asked. “Like Lounds?”

That got Jack. He opened his mouth, shut it with an audible click. “It’s not just fame, then,” he said at last. “He knows how to get fame. He knows how to get attention.”

“Specifically fame through me, specifically my attention,” Will said. He tried really hard to ignore the thought that he was very much succeeding.

This is the most fun you’ve had in years.

“With your life in danger, I’m going to at least put a car outside of your apartment,” he said. “Something to keep an eye on you so that if something happens, someone is there to help.”

Will didn’t disagree, although he thought it funny that for the many years they’d been trying to get the Chesapeake Ripper, a non-descript white van outside of an apartment like his would be the most cliché way of hoping to catch him.

He wondered if the Chesapeake Ripper would call again to share in the joke.

-

Dear Will,

I want to see the sort of words you’d use to describe something outside of the comfort zone of your lumbar-supportive chair. Something where you lose, no matter what you do.

What has roots as nobody sees,
Is taller than trees,
Up, up it goes,
And yet never grows?

You have one day.

-Avid Fan

Avid Fan,

The murders of Mary Mai and Rufus Mai are tragic, and I’m bereft in the face of such senseless slaughter. You want to know what words I’d use to describe something where I’ve lost, but truly you want to see a reaction because that is the sort of person you are. You act in order to observe what
people do in order to react.

There are no words to comfort grief. There are no words to explain the silence that encompasses those that have lost and will never hold their loved ones again. I assume you sought to see the things I’d say to garner hatred or resentment towards you, but I don’t have to do that. You murdered those innocent people two days before you sent your letter to me; no matter the actions done by the FBI or myself, you wanted to see what it’d be like for me to lose. I didn’t lose, their family did.

I don’t have to say anything for the people to hate you –you did that well enough on your own.

Ratings dropped at their death, although when other newspapers could also confirm that they were dead before Will Graham had ever received any written word, the ratings rose back up, then increased. Will was right; he didn’t have to urge the people to hate the ‘Avid Fan’. At the face of two pillars of the community murdered on the eve of their anniversary, there rose such a backlash that Will found donations being sent in to be given to the family, to the children who’d lost so much.

Although Freddie Lounds had the cover page story, Will was given, along with his column, a second page space in order to cover the funeral and the ways that the community gave in full.

The problem, he realized, was that he was waiting for the Chesapeake Ripper to do something. He wasn’t testing the Ripper, he was sitting there and waiting to be tested. What was he doing to find him? Where was he going to look? The FBI was in over their heads –that much he could tell by the way Crawford struggled. It was personal to him, therefore his anger seemed to be his enemy as he looked at the bodies. Will stared down at his desk, at the reports, news clippings and ‘misplaced’ files he’d snagged from Freddie’s desk, considering the Chesapeake Ripper.

Why was he waiting on the FBI to do something he knew that he could do?

He’d gone to school for this. He’d trained for this. Not only had he been top of his class, he’d been fast-tracked to the FBI until his psych-eval came back worse for wear. They’d wanted him, realized they could never have him.

The Chesapeake Ripper was batting at him like a cat with a ball of yarn, but that didn’t mean Will had to be the yarn.

“I’m thinking of doing something irrational,” he said to Beverly over drinks.

“Don’t shave your head, you’ll look like you’ve done time,” she warned him.

“Looking at the files from what Lounds has said about the FBI-”

“Okay but you know she shouldn’t have those files-”

“I’m sure I could do better than they could. There’s no forensic evidence, nothing for them to go on, so it’s not like the lack of a lab-”

“-and I’m pretty sure she blew the guy that got her copies of one of those, so-”

“-would hurt me, so it comes down to brains, outside resources, and the fact that-”

“-it’s not really pitching much in her corner for you to be-”

“-the Chesapeake Ripper wants to be my friend.”
“-grabbing shit from her that could get you –wait, what?” Beverly leveled an intense, probing stare at him.

“The Chesapeake Ripper wants to be my friend,” Will repeated.

Their shots arrived then, and Beverly took hers, slamming it down with a little too much force.

“You’re joking,” she said.

“He called my phone, and he said that he wanted to be my friend.” Will took his as well, licorice-colored liquid smooth along his tongue and down the back of his throat. Beside his normal whiskey coke, Fernet was a luxury, something to celebrate nothing more than a desire to partake in something that tasted far better than the ass-end of a cat the way that well-drinks often did.

“I’m guessing you haven’t told anyone from the FBI,” Beverly said. Rather than complete disapproval, there was almost a note of intrigue, the only sort of note that a reporter could have in their voice at a time like that. Newspaper curiosity was something far different from the regular, everyday variety. It was nosier. Less worried about why he didn’t tell the FBI and more that he hadn’t told the FBI.

“Fuck no,” he retorted. “They’d cart me off.”

“To protect you.”

“To shove legal papers up my ass.”

“So you’re, what –going to try and get him yourself? Be his friend?” That was said with disapproval, a pointed stare in his direction.

“Considering he butchers and kills people, I’m going to go with a ‘no’ on friendship,” Will said slowly. “But the FBI has been trying to catch him for years. They’ve got nothing. Hell, I don’t know if I’d get anything, but it’s better than sitting around and waiting for him to get me, right?”

“This is coming from the guy that can’t be bothered to walk two blocks farther than normal for a grocery mart with better prices,” Beverly pointed out.

“I’ve got to do something, Beverly.”

She nodded, stirred her White Russian around with the little straw stuck in it. She grabbed the glass, took a sip and considered him just across the way, a little harried, a little curious –no, definitely curious. The only kind of curious he needed her to be.

“I’ll help,” she said. “I don’t know what to look for, but if you’re going to make an ass of yourself, I want to see it when it happens.”

“He’s killing people,” Will reminded her.

“And Freddie Lounds reigning on the front page is killing me. You find something out about this guy, maybe you’ll get front page. Hell, maybe you don’t, I get front page, I get you to front page with me.”

“This isn’t about work politics.”

“No, that’s just a perk.”
They smacked the lip of their glasses together, downed their drinks in one go. Will had had
enough shitty whiskey to really put this on the low end of that list, but with something in the
distance, he figured maybe it’d be the last time he had to drink something so foul.

His watch beeped to remind him that if it was a work night, he’d better get his ass to bed.

Chapter End Notes

A special, lovely thanks to my patrons Emily Elm, Matilda, Superlurk, Duhaunt6, and
Inky_Starlight! You're the best!!

Sorry for the late post, but I've just returned from a trip across states for my niece's
birthday! She just turned four years old, and she says thank you for your patience and
that she hopes that you enjoy!
Chapter 6:

He went to the mountains again, after he ensured no one else was around. As long as one wasn’t too much trouble, park rangers left well enough alone, and he figured that he had more than enough ability to keep quiet while he gathered his thoughts. That was the name of the game, he figured, as he picked his way along a small hiking trail. He needed to gather his thoughts, cast every which way as they were.

The bodies were gone, but the scene remained. The bloodstains remained. Despite the fresh air, the death remained.

Will sat down in the pine needles where he’d fallen just days before, and he stared at the space around him. The muted glow of his red headlamp ensured that he wouldn’t spook wildlife, although it did absolutely nothing to lend the space a lighter air. The bloodstains didn’t look as terrible in the red light, though. They could have been the remnants of spilled water, if his imagination hadn’t already repainted the bodies displayed with care and utmost purpose.

He inhaled the taste of madness, and he decided that it was a meticulous sort of madness to be.

Calculating. That is what he’d call the Chesapeake Ripper. Intelligent, calculating, and amidst his delicate reveling in the macabre, there was the soul of a poet.

Will wondered if the Chesapeake Ripper was a writer as well, in his spare time, or if his artistic renditions were only best displayed with the use of flesh and blood.

He stayed there for far longer than he meant to; time, for all of its clever uses, escaped him as he inhaled the scene where Mary Mai used to be. In its dips and sways, he wondered at her life, run as it was with the notifications on her watch. His own watch was quiet, keeping time with the digital face muted to a lowlight.

It wasn’t until the sound of a raccoon behind him startled him from his reverie that he realized he’d accumulated dew along his skin and clothing. He blinked once, then rapidly to dispel the strange sense of time slipping away once more, and he stood, bones complaining and creaking from holding his pose for so long. The clock read 4:23 A.M.

He didn’t leave Mary Mai behind on that mountain; rather, he took her with him, to better keep him company as he stayed awake the rest of the night, wondering at the care the Chesapeake Ripper took as he painted the world around him a lurid shade of red.

He went to the alleyway where the homeless man tried to trip him. It was a long shot for him to still be there, but when Will saw him hunched next to the same broken crate of what he could now identify as tomatoes long gone bad, he figured he was more than just a homeless man.

“How much?” he prompted.
The man peered up at him, tilted his head so his fringe covered his milky eyes. Huddled into his jacket as he was, he gave the impression of something old, decrepit.

“How much?” Will prompted again.

“For him, twenty,” the man finally said through chapped lips. “For you, thirty.”

Right. Will fished thirty bucks out of his wallet and handed it over. The man counted, then counted again. Satisfied, he tucked it up into the ski cap on his head and scratched lousy hair.

“What do you know about the man from before?” Will asked.

“What do you know about the man from before?” he replied.

“Not enough. Not a name, not an occupation; you know something, though. He paid you to keep you here to wait for me.”

“Did he?”

Will scowled, motioning towards the ski cap where his money now lay.

“He did,” the man said, relenting. He rubbed his stubbly jaw, mulling over Will’s shabby suit and tie done in only a half-Windsor. “He’d never dress like you, that’s for sure.”

“Upper class?”

“Very upper class. Socialite.”

The Chesapeake Ripper was a socialite. Will nodded, mind turning at that. It would make sense that he’d have that sort of affluence, able to blend into the crowd where no one would ever suspect him. The rich had a way of doing that—being just aloof enough even without their dirty secrets. A socialite that liked their home private and untouched wouldn’t be questioned the same way a poor man with odd, eccentric tendencies would be.

“He’s not American,” Will said.

“European.”

“Not English.”

“Not French.”

They considered one another, and Will sighed. “What did he tell you to give to me? Information? A riddle?”

The man reached into the many jackets on his frame and retracted a letter, stained by fingers turning it over and over and over again. Not the Chesapeake Ripper’s fingers, but the hands of the man in front of him, one curious but not dumb. The wax seal on it was unbroken. Rather than the plain white copier paper of his riddles, it was a thick, rich material that felt like cloth fibers had been woven into it rather than just tree pulp.

“Is that all?”

“He said to say, ‘Good luck, Will Graham.’”

Will started to walk away, then stopped. He glanced back at the man that watched, eyes
yellowed and skin faded, wind-chapped. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

The man laughed, stood up, and walked away from him.

Seated at his desk, Will turned the letter over and over in his palms, getting a feel for the weight of the paper and just how expensive it was. He knew a guy that could probably find out which store it was purchased at, maybe find someone who’d let him look at the cameras and see what he could see.

That would probably require him to be sociable, though.

He opened the letter, slid fingers along the dried wax and withdrew the paper inside that was of equal thickness and weight. It matched, like he’d found a bargain set, something aged and faintly reminiscent of parchment.

Dear Will,

You haven’t taken this to Jack Crawford. It’s also not an assumption that you haven’t informed him of our tête-à-tête—I know enough about you to be able to presume such things. No doubt now you’ve ruminated on the loss of Mary Mai for long enough that you have decided that you’ve been cheated something, and you’re going to see to it that I’m found and held accountable.

I’m looking forward to this.

You don’t recall how we met. I will remind you, if anything to remind you that there is someone in this world that sees your capacity for endless possibility. Two years ago, a man stumbled into me, drunk, shoving his way out of a bar with glasses askew and tone slurred. I hadn’t been looking for my latest victim; I’d satiated my hungers and curiosities for the time. There was just enough force in your violence, though, that I decided to see just what would become of you. I hadn’t yet decided if your end would be by myself or something else—alcohol poisoning? A mugging?—but I was curious. The human condition, rife with its imperfections, foolishness, and greed, is a curious thing.

You found your way into an alley where a man with knife mange on his arm stopped you and demanded your money. Any other would have tried to console him or fight him. You did neither.

Instead, you laughed.

Your glasses, something I’d thought to be crooked from your inebriation, were straightened, and you met his eyes and bared your teeth like a wild animal. Crooked by forced appearance, by nothing more than the desire of an aesthetic to make you seem far weaker than you were.

‘Your hands are shaking from withdrawal, and the pale skin on your finger tells me a recent end to a rather serious relationship. Are you desperate, or are you merely stupid?’ you asked him. ‘That prison tattoo is fresh, probably infected. No doubt you thought I’d be an easy target for some quick cash, but you’re going to have to kill me to get it.’

‘I’ll kill you,’ the man promised you.

‘The roughened, hairless skin on your arm says yes, but there’s a look in your eyes that says no,’ you continued, unheeding of him. ‘Maybe because you’re looking in my eyes and seeing I’d rip your throat out with my teeth before I die. If you’re unsure if what you’re seeing is correct, I promise you it is. You’ll try to stab me, I’ll twist to the side, and I’ll rip your throat out with my teeth.’

‘Just give me your money,’ he pressed. The knife shifted, a shaky hand from withdrawals, as
you’d surmised.

‘No, no, haven’t you already realized? You’ve lost.’

Before he could speak, before he could lunge, the knife was no longer in his hands but yours, and the smile you drew across his guts with the acutest precision cast blood every which way, across your hands, your own stomach, your feet. In the dim light of the alley, Will Graham, I watched you smile as you eased him to the ground, a cold and detached hunger in your eyes as he gasped for help, hands holding his stomach in.

You took the knife with you and cleaned it meticulously on your shirt as you went.

I saved him, not because his life was of any form of intrinsic importance, but because as one that once worked in the field of medicine and surgery, I felt a responsibility to at least try. You, though; I decided that you would live. Not because of anything in regards to borrowed time, but because you were savage enough to steal it.

You’ll be happy to know that he lived, and clearly no charges were filed against you.

How banal was it for me to realize, finding you sometime later, that your life was not all such excitement and near-death experiences. You didn’t toe the line and let adrenaline and desire be your guide. You worked at a second-rate news agency that specialized in tacky miracle cream ads on the back page beside the rather sour words of a writer whose descriptors of chiffon fell flat. You followed the demands of your watch, beeps informing you of when to eat and drink. You wore glasses, not out of a need to see but a place to put your gaze rather than focus on anyone else around you. You were quiet. You were subdued.

So much untapped potential you held to create art in your very hands, wasted.

I’m curious about you, Mr. Graham. I am well aware of mankind’s capacity for violence – cruelty is a trait learned from our human ancestor’s, not our animal predecessors – but there was something so utterly dark and inhibited as yours. Upon reaching your home, did you realize your actions after waking to the sticky, dried substance coating your hands and lips? Did you panic, scrubbing it off into a sink stained with hard water, try and tell yourself it was a dream? Just what had you internalized that made you take it and return in full?

Do you fear that aspect of yourself? Do you fear your own Becoming, allowing that aspect to take hold and Make? I think that by the time this is all done, you won’t.

-Chesapeake Ripper

Will read it once, twice. On the third time, he absentmindedly gathered his things, informed Charlie that he had to do some footwork, and left Tattler News, buttoning his jacket against a crisp Fall wind that turned cheeks pink and noses red. The longer he walked, the faster his steps until he found himself not-quite jogging but not-quite walking, a pace that led him farther and farther away from the office until he found himself standing in front of a small pond where ducks paddled lazily through green water.

He wheezed out a breath, staring at the ugly, questionable green moss and algae before he slid off his jacket, dropped his things, and promptly jumped in.

The cold was a shock to his system, and it made his heart pound in every joint. Underneath the water that held a tinge of slime, he kept his eyes closed tight and held his breath, letting it soak down deep into his skin. When he could hold his breath no longer, he broke the surface and gulped
in air, treading water. Just across the way, a father and daughter pair stared at him, hands full of bread crumbs.

He swam back to shore and climbed out of the water as casually as he was able. In the face of their still gaping expressions, he explained, “I dropped something in there.”

“Did you get it?” the daughter asked.

“Oh, yes,” he said absently. He gathered his things and walked away, dripping water in sporadic splashes across the concrete.

The taxi driver only let him in after he laid his jacket down across the seat.

Upon arriving home, he showered and scrubbed himself, checking his watch to ensure nothing had happened to it. It was waterproof up to so many meters, allowing for quick dips in city ponds and long showers, and it responded to his lazy taps and prompts as he blinked hot water out of his eyes.

As he dressed in another shabby pair of slacks and a button-up, his hands found their way to a knife in his sock drawer, and he turned it over in his hands as he slumped onto his bed and swallowed so hard he could audibly hear the gulp.

Will Graham had a problem.

He didn’t remember that night, written so prolifically on what felt like vellum with a rather thin nib from an elegant fountain pen.

He did remember the next morning, though.

_He woke curled up on his bed with a knife cradled to his chest. He didn’t realize it was a knife, at first. Upon waking, his primary focus was the way liquor churned with his stomach acid, threatening mutiny of the most violent kind._

_He’d have probably kept it down, if the smell of blood hadn’t been so strong under his nose._

_He didn’t manage to make it to the bathroom, and after everything else that morning he, in the end, threw away his blankets and sheets stained with the aftermath of a terribly blurred night. Sitting dejected in his own vomit while his skin was hot and clammy, Will Graham stared down at the knife clenched in his fist, and he dropped it when he realized that it was stained with blood._

_As was the rest of him._

_He stripped the bed, as well as his clothes. Huddled at the bottom of the shower, he scrubbed blood from under his nails, off of the scruff of his face. A whimper passed his lips as he tried frantically to remember what had happened –nothing. It was not the blank wall that people described as memory loss, but more along the lines of an ocean wave, aspects of the evening sliding into place with ease, dipping into shallow spaces of sand to stay, other aspects wiped smooth, decimated with the force of just how much he’d consumed._

_He stayed in the shower until the water went cold, until he was shivering. No memory. No recollection. No idea._

_He thought to go to the police. After vomiting up bile and stomach acid, nothing left inside of him to give, he thought it was only right. He should have realized that subconsciously, he’d already decided to do anything but that as he washed the knife and scrubbed it with bleach, an old_
toothbrush he’d discovered at the back of a drawer the perfect tool to get into all of the fine places to reach.

When he sat in his front room for a long time after, trash bag with his sheets and blankets by the door, he finally acknowledged that he was most certainly not going to do anything about it. Whatever it was, it could stay a mystery.

He turned the knife over in his hands, admired the gut hook on the back. It was a hunting knife, something aged and loved tenderly with a leather-wrapped handle and a freshly sharpened edge. He never used it, tried often enough not to think about it, but every so often he sharpened it.

According to the Chesapeake Ripper, it was because he’d used it before.

It could very well be a lie, but he didn’t think it was. The day after that night had scared him, shocked him with the realization of just how capable he was of violence –violence towards what, he hadn’t known, but there’d been enough blood he’d assumed it was bad.

He tilted the knife, scraped the blade along the hair of his arm. Hair fell against the sharp edge, broken with little effort. It made his skin pink, a half a breath’s pressure from breaking. Knife mange, the Ripper called it. A man with a knife tried to mug him, and in his most intoxicated of states, he’d laughed.

The Ripper saw Will’s capacity for darkness, and he liked it.

Where did that leave him?

-  

It left him with an odd taste in his mouth, and he reached out to Todd in marketing to help him track down where the paper came from. Todd was a quick, nervous man whose hands twitched and tapped too much. It didn’t take someone like Will to know it was because of cocaine, although the why behind the addiction was always something that intrigued him.

He wasn’t quite sure if it was the journalist in him, or if it was the empathy disorder. Probably a bit of both.

“It’s nice paper,” Todd said, feeling up the envelope. Will hadn’t thought it wise to give him the letter where his most sordid secret lay. “Real nice. Like rich cat nice.”

“Like boutique nice?” Will wondered. He watched Todd’s fingers tap, and it made his own hand drum idly on his leg.

“Like Staples couldn’t get their hands on it nice,” Todd said. “I could find it. What for, though?”

“They sent donation money for the Mai family with no other information. We have to file something for donations, and I just need the name so that I can put it on record when it comes time for tax season,” he lied. Will realized that he was actually rather good at that.

“So you find the place, find the name?” Todd nodded. He’d not yet reached the level of paranoia where he was suspect to the statements of any person. He was at a rather malleable level, all things considered. Impressionable. Usable.

Will wasn’t sure how he felt, analyzing Todd and finding his addiction weakness to be of use to him –there was knowing it could be of use and actually taking advantage of it. He had to find The
Ripper, though. He’d do what he had to.

“Can you do it?”

“What do I get for it?”

“I keep Charlie out of here when you go to your stash that you keep down by the printers.”

“Got it.” That was no debate. Charlie’s stash was sacred, and Will didn’t have to fork out extra cash just to get something.

He walked away feeling a little dirty but ultimately hopeful.

At Beverly’s desk, they looked over a few things, art references to the loving rendition of Birth of Venus, the cold and meticulous Wound Man, the archaic 100 Years of War. Of course, they were not the prints of such paintings –did that make them something other than art? He wasn’t sure. The bodies were placed with such care, such devotion, heads turned in supplication, hands grasping sticks made to look like crude swords. Heads bowed over the paper, Beverly seemed just as mystified as he was. When he looked up to her face, though, all he could see was disgust.

“What do you think?” He tried not to sound like he was worried for her answer, unsure in the face of her expression.

“This guy thinks this is art?” she asked.

“…In his mind, it’s art. It’s a recreation, it’s…” He pondered over a word that wouldn’t make her nose scrunch up so high. “It’s uplifting, in a way. He takes them and makes them more.”

“Makes them more?”

“Immortalizes them.”

“Huh.” He wasn’t sure what kind of ‘huh’ that was. Their heads bowed back down over the photos Freddie had managed to take. His stomach soured that she didn’t quite see what he could see. He knew what that said about him, that his empathy could somehow reach even these people in their final stages of life, recreations of something beautiful, somehow made More.

“He used to be a doctor,” Will said quietly. Beverly peeked about to make sure Freddie wasn’t lurking.

“You think?”

Will knew, but he wasn’t going to say anything like that. “These people are being mutilated, but they’re also missing organs inside, right? Surgical trophies, taken out with skill and precision. There’s research to try and know how, then there’s going to school and actually knowing how to remove organs so well. It’d be messier if he wasn’t.”

“So?”

“What if he knew these people? What if he’d spoken with them, interacted with them?”

Like he’d spoken with and interacted with me, apparently.

“You think maybe he found some of them while working in the hospital?” Beverly asked.

“Or maybe all of them?”
“There are no other ties to one another, I looked. Maybe medical records?”

“Maybe online records?” Beverly suggested.

“Do we have a way of finding out?”

They let out curt sighs in unison, and Will’s watch beeped. Time for a water break. He stood, walked over to the water cooler, ruminated on his theory. It made sense for the Chesapeake Ripper to have once been a surgeon—he’d said he was once a doctor. Did they all go to the same hospital? The same doctor? Similar injuries? As much as people liked to create fear with the idea that there was no rhyme or reason to his choices, there had to be something. For some, it was hair color; others, foot size. Even faint, even obscure, there had to be something that made them stand out to the Ripper.

He finished his water and tapped the icon on the watch. That was four waters for the day versus four coffees. The fact that the watch had an app so that he could see just how much coffee it took for him to function versus water for him to stay hydrated made him wonder just how many other people in the world were like him, slaves to a device that made them appear relatively normal.

There was Mary Mai, at least. Maybe others used schedules, notes, agendas, or were rich enough to have a secretary do it for them. Just how many people were there like him?

At the very least, he figured the Chesapeake Ripper was somewhat like him. Normal enough for no one to question. Normal enough that as he tied and stitched tabards onto the bodies of his victims, no one thought to look in the creases of his palms to see the blood.

He got home late; his watch’s reminders were furious, insistent that he’d missed dinner and his evening water. It did congratulate him, however, on his steps for the day. Countless trips to and from his desk to Beverly’s ensured that he hadn’t by any means doubled his step goal, but he’d at least made a good headway.

_do you want to increase your step goal to match your current records?_ The watch asked.

“No,” he replied out loud, and he dismissed the notification. There was supposed to be something satisfying about meeting a goal so well that they wanted you to create a new one. He still hadn’t found an app to care about things like that.

He did care, however, when he looked up from his watch to see that dinner had been laid out for him, rich and decadent smells wafting from a plate whose intricate filigree on the side boasted something far more luxurious than his dinnerware within his shabby cupboards.

It looked like lamb; certainly it smelled like lamb. Laid out alongside something that appeared to be mashed cauliflower and parsley in a dark, savory sauce, it gave all indications that it was definitely lamb.

Will wasn’t entirely sure of that, though.

Next to the plate was a glass of wine and a glass of water. Propped up beside the glasses, a note lay. It was the same material as the letter that Todd was now investigating, written with the same, careful hand. Will dragged a pinky along one of the curling ‘T’s and bit his lip.

You should be more particular about the things that you put into your body, especially if you’re going to try and catch me. Enjoy.
There was no guarantee that it was lamb. Will eyed it with extreme prejudice as he sat down, and he dragged a finger through the sauce before he tasted it. Heady. Flavorful. A hint of thyme and basil. He glanced about the room, but it appeared that nothing else had been tampered with; no Chesapeake Ripper lurked to surprise him with another dinner-for-two.

If anything, it was entirely likely that this was Mary Mai, laid out in the most exquisite of ways for the Ripper’s amusement, just to see what Will would do.

Which begged the question: what was he going to do?

He should call Crawford and try to see if they could glean any prints from the plate or the glass. He should throw the meat away, disgusted with the idea that it could potentially be human meat on his plate.

And yet…

In the silence and loneliness of his shabby, rundown apartment, Will Graham picked up a fork with curved, silver tines, and he grasped the matching knife in his other hand. With no one to witness his actions, no one to hiss censure in his ear, he deliberately cut a piece of meat and took a bite, savoring the taste on his tongue.

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to my Patrons: Emily Elm, Sylarana, Matilda, Duhaunt6, Superlurk, and Inky-Starlight! You're the best!

Thank you guys so much for all of the love this has gotten! Seriously, it has really inspired me for what happens next! Someone messaged me to tell me they'd been talking about this fic with someone else on Tumblr, and it seriously took me aback because it's like...I guess I didn't realize that y'all discuss together the stuff that happens in these stories?? Seriously? It's just made my week tbh!!
Chapter 7:

Getting medical records wasn’t easy. There was an issue with the law, for one, and after the fourth hospital in the area refused to let him look into their patient files without some sort of officer of the law present to validate his claims, he stood out on the steps and scowled into the late autumn afternoon.

So much for going around Jack Crawford to find his killer.

He answered the phone when it rang, huffing down the last few steps to make his way towards a small coffee shop nearby. It was Todd, master of illegal substance abuse and marketing.

“I got your paper, although let me just say that whoever bought this probably avoided putting their name because they’re big money.”

“Big money?”

“Rich, loaded, whatever the hell you want,” Todd said. There was the sound of crunching, chip bag rustling. “It’s a place down near downtown called “Lily Works,” and they do specialized paper, announcements, you name it. The color and style is “Florence Alabaster” and you were right, it’s a vellum blend. Family owned store, only like…5 people working there.”

“Good find, Todd.”

“Good find to you too, ass,” Todd said. He was still sore about his cocaine. “You get their name, try and see if they’re in the market for a sugar baby or something because this stuff isn’t sold individually, and it’s about twenty bucks a sheet.”

Will whistled, low and impressed. Someone walking by mistook it as him attempting to dog whistle at them, and they shot him a dirty look before they hurried on.

“Anything else you need, oh wondrous one?”

“I’ll let you know if I can think of anything,” Will promised.

“Yeah, you do that,” Todd retorted sarcastically.

He hung up, and Will grabbed a Frappuccino, just because. He didn’t exactly need it, but he needed something to do with his hands, something to ground him since his thoughts were hung up on how he was going to find a way to get hospital records, let alone find out if the victims had even all gone to the same hospital. First one step, then another. He felt the Chesapeake Ripper, just out of reach of his grasp. Fingers tightened on his Frappuccino.

“Thought I’d find you here.”

Freddie sat down across from him, and Will tracked the movement, trying to ignore the odd twisting in his gut that said that out of anyone he wanted to see, she didn’t quite make the list.

“Why did you think that?”
“Because you were near the hospital and got shut down on looking at private medical records, so you needed a pick-me-up,” she explained.

“Spying, Lounds?”

“Stealing, Graham?”

They considered one another over the linoleum tabletop. It looked like old, aged wood, although an experimental tap of fingers when he first sat down revealed the truth. Particle board with a plastic overlay. Will took a deliberate, slurping sip of his drink and set it down on the napkin so that it didn’t leave a water stain for someone else to have to wipe down later.

“What do you want?” he asked at last—not as cornered as Todd, but a little bit cornered. He’d stolen from her file cabinet, after all.

“In.”

“That’s not that easy,” he said slowly.

“Katz hates me, I know, but that’s not the issue. You can convince Katz, but you can’t convince the hospital desk woman to look at records, can you? I can get around that. You need me.”

“I need you,” Will scoffed. He took another sip of his drink so that his hands were cupped rather than clenched.

“I can go where you can’t,” Freddie assured him.

“At a price.”

“If you’re good at something, Graham, don’t do it for free.” She tilted her head, expression intent, earnest. In that moment, Will would have painted her passionate. “You think you’re the only one that wants to catch the Chesapeake Ripper? You think you’re the only one that thinks the FBI is in over their head with this guy, bound so much by their rules that they’ll never catch him?”

Will frowned, glancing about the quaint shop whose baristas looked hassled, whose small bakery section had been picked clean by the morning rush. The quiet music was crackly, static from a bad speaker, and he rubbed his ear—self-soothing, he’d once been told. He did that a lot.

“How long have you been compiling your stuff?” he asked.

“Years. Nothing yet to really put out a new article, but I keep it on the back burner at all times. Once that drops, Graham, I’m all over it. I look at that file I keep at least once a week. That’s how I knew it was missing so soon.” A pause. “Ass.”

He sighed. “What’s your price?”

Freddie tried to look contrite in her victory. “Co-written special, front page.” At Will’s mouth ready to object, she continued with, “Katz gets next page; I won’t leave her behind.”

“You won’t?” he asked dubiously.

“No, otherwise I’d never hear the end of it.”

“What do you know that I have?”

“I know you’ve had to have corresponded with him in some other way, otherwise this
wouldn’t get to you as much. The FBI has people coming by the agency daily, checking in, checking on mail, a second rate van across the street like they’re slick. Sooner or later, they’re going to try and tap your phone until they realize you don’t have a landline, you’ve got a watch and the phone you keep in your left pocket at all times but that’s about it.” She tilted her head, her large blue eyes keen, sharp. “How did he get a hold of you?”

“My phone.”

“Why didn’t you tell them?”

“Same reason you haven’t taken any of your theories to them.”

_I want this for myself._

They stared at one another, weighing their worth in the crackly silence. There was an uncomfortable sensation as Will studied her that made him see himself in the curl of her hair, the purse of her full lips. Chapstick, not lipstick. Fresh-faced rather than covered. She let her mouth and her hair talk for her, unapologetic and considerably far more real than most people—far more real than the person he projected to the public, that was for damn sure.

“Look, I do a lot of writing about psychopaths,” she said quietly. “I know them almost as much as I know myself.”

“Do you?”

“I know enough to know you’re one bad day away from something much like that,” she said snidely. “I know enough to know you’re not doing this to get ahead at work.”

“You once crept into a man’s hospital room to steal photos of him after he was gutted by a psychopath, Freddie,” Will said slowly. “I think you have more of a capacity for psychopathic tendencies, not me.”

“Look at us, a couple of psychos at a coffee shop. What’ll Charlie do when he finds out?”

“As long as we do our jobs, I don’t think he’ll do much.”

“Is that a deal, then, Graham?” Freddie asked. “You gonna let me in? Or are you going to make me reach around you the old-fashioned way?”

Freddie’s old-fashioned way of getting what she wanted often meant breaking the law.

The silence held for a song and a half before she held her hand out to shake his, deliberate. Confidant. Will hesitated, staring at it. If he did this, there was no going back. He’d have to not only play, but play somewhat fair and somewhat by her rules that were more morally grey than his own.

However, in the face of catching the Ripper, who was he to really complain?

He shook her hand firmly, let go as soon as she slackened her grip.

“I can’t go back into those hospitals until a different shift lead is working,” he said.

Freddie’s smile was utterly vicious. “Leave that to me.”

He left it to her and headed towards Lily Works. His watch beeped to tell him his steps for
the day were exceptionally well: Keep Up the Good Pace!

Lily Works was just about what he’d expected of a fine paper’s business. Small, classic windows with wrought iron décor and cream walls. Elegant picture frames housed still life paintings of vases with blooming flowers, and he stared balefully at a tulip in one such painting while he waited for the cheery desk clerk to find the manager. He was a little mad at himself for not realizing that of course Freddie Lounds would see that her stuff was missing, but details; if she could get him hospital records to try and find a doctor, he could get over it.

“How can I help you, Agent Crawford?” the manager asked, stepping out. Her prim pencil skirt and sharp button-up was a direct contrast to the hideous plaid ensemble Freddie had visually assaulted him with at the coffee shop.

“Thank you for your time; we’re currently investigating someone that we have reason to believe purchased a small package of letters with envelopes here within the last month or so.” Will found that with hair combed back and tie straight, he was adept at lying—not only adept, but quite convincing. He handed the woman the card Jack Crawford had given him, tucking his hands into his pockets. It’d been modified, just enough that the phone number on the card was his rather than the FBI Agent’s.

“Oh?”

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions, miss…”

“Miss Nadine, please,” she said. Her pleasant face paled, and she glanced at the card before tucking it away.

“Miss Nadine.” Will’s smile was pleasant, professional. Thin-lipped. “Do you recall by chance the purchase of a vellum blend paper by the name of ‘Florence Alabaster’?”

“Of course I do,” she replied. Will’s eyebrows lifted in surprise at her lack of hesitation, and she continued, “I hardly sell it, so I was surprised. He came in with the name, as though the gentleman had looked at our things before. I didn’t have him on record, though, so he must have just known the color.”

“Do you happen to know when that was?”

That took her longer, and she puzzled over it as she went to a small binder and began flipping through it. A family owned store that kept track through writing, still, unable to quite jump into the 21st century with electronics. It meant she’d be more open to sharing information, though. She hadn’t even asked for his badge. She didn’t bite her lip or tap fingers, her concentration stealing away her energy to focus better on the task at hand. When she found it, she stuck her finger out beside the name with confidence.

“Yes, Dr. Hannibal Lecter?” Her mouth fumbled with his name. “Yes, that’s him. A month and a half ago, looks like.”

Will tried to stomp down the excitement that made his heart rate spike. “Do you keep cameras?”

“Yes, but I’d have to ask the owner to access it. He’s out of town until next Monday, so I can call you then and see what he says?”

“Yes…that would be helpful.” He jotted the name down, his pulse climbing along his neck,
stomping just at the spot under his jaw.

He had a name.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Agent Crawford?” she asked.

“No, this was incredibly helpful, Miss Nadine. Do you remember much about the gentleman?”

“Quite polite, kind, and self-assured. He had a rather unique sense of style, I think, but you know customers.” She laughed a little. “Eclectic is our middle name!”

“Thank you.” He flashed her a brief smile, tucked his notepad and pen away, and saw himself out.

As he walked, a quick google search brought up the name Hannibal Lecter, right in the Baltimore area.

There was no photo, but that was nothing. What it did show was an extensive list of reviews for his work in psychiatry, as well as a major contributor to the Fine Arts Museum right in the heart of the city. No Facebook, no Tumblr, no blog, no Linkd In, but he had published several works in psychiatric journals that were well-rated. Will gnawed on his lip, reading each link, his pulse pounding faster and faster until he was near-running to expel it, skirting through the crowds of passerby as he exited from the browser and texted Freddie:

Let me know the MOMENT you have what you said you can get.

He just needed a cross-reference, something to tie the supposed Hannibal Lecter to any of the victims, and he’d pay the good doctor a visit.

-  

He sat in Beverly’s apartment on the floor the next evening, surrounded by photos and articles. On one end of the couch, Freddie Lounds sat poised and unassuming, and on the other end Beverly was glaring with the fury of what he suspected to be near a thousand suns.

He pointedly ignored both of them.

“You said you had something,” Freddie prompted.

“You said no Freddie,” Beverly snapped.

He continued to ignore them.

“This is a prominent figure in Baltimore,” he murmured. “He wrote an article discussing percentages of psychopaths within prominent societal positions and discussed their stigmas in society.”

“So?”

He turned, walking over to Mary Mai’s file, scooping it up. “Mary Mai, suffering mild depression and body dysmorphia, sought aid for the past year and a half under the care of a Dr. Hannibal Lecter, top rated psychiatrist within the Baltimore area.”

“Ah.” Beverly’s face lightened at the connection, and she sat forward. “You traced the paper origins of the new letter, too?”
“Recent purchase of one pack of Florence Alabaster paper at Lily Works by Hannibal Lecter within a month and a half.” He reached out and grabbed it, holding it up for inspection – just the envelope. He’d have rather killed himself than let them read the letter.

“You don’t think the police will just claim it’s hearsay?” Freddie wondered. “Or mere coincidence?”

“Investigative reporting, Lounds,” he taunted quietly. “I’m thinking that I go see Dr. Lecter under the guise of needing therapy for what’s happened to me as a result of this ‘avid fan’. I just need to get a piece of paper with his writing on it, and we can cross-reference it with the writing from his other notes.” If they were his. Will wasn’t quite sure how to feel about already giving this Dr. Lecter the blame and responsibility of so many murders. He should find an app to tell him not to jump to conclusions.

“He’ll know it’s a trap if you show up,” Beverly protested.

“Not necessarily.” He didn’t want to explain the therapists he’d seen in the past, paraded before him from the age of twelve and up. Lecter would take one look at his previous files and would know he wasn’t faking something.

That, and if he was the Chesapeake Ripper, he’d have known about that long before he ever contacted Will.

“You’d hear it from his voice, too,” she said doubtfully. “Why not just call him?”

Will tapped a few icons on his watch and pressed play. A crackly but somewhat clear recording sounded on his phone.

“Dr. Lecter’s office, this is Mariah speaking; how can I help you?”

“Does Dr. Lecter allow for you to make appointments over the phone?”

“He does, although it looks like his next available time wouldn’t be until next month, October 11th at four o’clock P.M."

“You know what, that works for me. My name is Will Graham.”

He stopped the recording when it got into details, and he couldn’t help the small smirk on his lips at Beverly’s resigned expression. “It gives me more than enough time to have the column ready, as well as continue cross-referencing his ties to these people. The more evidence we get, the harder the hammer will drop on him, if that’s the guy.”

“I’ve got a guy that can get me into the hospital that he used to work at, no problem,” Freddie assured them.

“I bet you’ve got a guy,” Beverly said crossly.

“Do you think he chooses out of convenience?” Freddie wondered. She unfolded herself from her part of the couch and wandered over to the circle of photos, files, and pages printed on regular, dingy printer paper. “Choosing your client seems a bit risky.”

“He’d have access to her personal information,” Will replied. “He wouldn’t do that very often, but if the shoe fit, he’d wear it.”

“A personality beef?” Beverly wondered.
“An impulsive kill?” Freddie murmured.

“What’d you say, Beverly?” Will asked. His head snapped up from reading the notes he’d taken on Mary Mai, gaze fixating on his friend.

“…A personality beef?” She tilted her head at Will oddly, like he’d spoken in tongues.

“What if it was?” he asked. “What if there was something about them that was odd, off, something about their personality that resonated with him?”

“Or it could be a freak coincidence and it’s not Lecter. We’ll have to see the statuses of his other patients,” said Freddie. She knelt down by one of the photos and studied it. “If we could access that sort of information, it’d be easy to see a pattern.”

“I’ll know more about it once I can see him in person,” he said.

Despite not being able to get to an appointment sooner, Will couldn’t stop the thrum, the constant hum that rested alongside his veins, arteries, capillaries: he had a name. He had a name.

-

Dear Will,

What do you think about people with Dissociative Identity Disorder? Someone was found not guilty in the court recently under this whole ‘my alter-self killed them’ thing and I’m not buying it.

-Skeptical

Dear Skeptical,

I actually followed that case out of curiosity when it occurred because even within the psychiatric field, you’ll find there are quite a few doctors that are unwilling to entertain it as a real disorder. The notion that there can be multiple personalities within a mind is not unrealistic when there is severe trauma and abuse, much like what occurred with the person in question, Henry Atley. His disassociation from the horrendous abuse that began as a child manifested in personalities that arose in order to protect him, one of which continued in his later life to protect him in ways that were unseemly because it could not understand.

I think the struggle people have is that they compare a disorder like this with something much like substance abuse. A person that made a mistake while drunk will make excuses the next morning which may or may not be believed. The fact of the matter is, no matter how drunk we are, we are still considered to be responsible for our actions, no matter what they are because we are still ourselves in our entirety, merely far more lax with our inhibitions.

In the case of Dissociative Identity Disorder, though, there is a new self. You are unaware of this self, and it has simple functions, a simpler self. You are in no way responsible for this person because you are not this person, nor can you control any aspect of them.

The more terrifying thought is that you aren’t even aware they exist.

Should you be responsible for their actions when you are unaware of their existence? Should you go to jail for a person that acted –by their own unknown thought process –in self-defense? You’d say no if such a thing happened to someone you loved. Don’t think of them as the drunk in the alleyway that attempts to steal your money, Skeptical. Think of them as the person that has endured an unspeakable horror and was not given the proper tools to move on from it.
Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to my patrons: Emily Emily, Sylarana, Matilda, Inky-Starlight, Duhaunt6, and Superlurk!

And we all know...Freddie was going to notice pretty quickly when her stuff went missing. Investigative journalism and all. :)

Thank you all so very much for all of your support both here and on tumblr! It means so much!
Chapter 8:

Writer’s block again.

Will sat at his kitchen table, cigarette dangling unlit from his lips. The word document sat teasing, bare-boned and holding nothing of any remote worth on the page. It wasn’t the first time he’d closed out of a word doc. without saving, and it wouldn’t be the last. The blank page and the blinking, obtrusive faint line mocked him with its lack of depth, its lack of luster.

*What made the Chesapeake Ripper become?*

Cheesy. Cheap. Predictable. Back stories weren’t always Will’s interest. Back stories always made him feel like he was 2 seconds away from tumbling into their life, knowing their struggles intimately. He much preferred holding people at a distance, studying them without having to become them.

He backspaced the question and scowled at the blank document once more. He idly scratched his head, then gave in and lit the cigarette, taking a desolate drag.

His problem, he figured, was that one couldn’t study the Chesapeake Ripper at an arm’s length. He glanced to the side where Freddie’s articles sat alongside articles from other newspapers, everyone asking questions they’d never get the answers to because no one could get ahold of the Chesapeake Ripper to even ask him.

Will could, though. If he fully embraced the Chesapeake Ripper, really dug into his skin and nestled among his veins and pulse and bones, he could answer those questions with perfect assurance.

Did he want to do that, though? Did he want to step into the spaces that the Chesapeake Ripper walked and answer the things that no one else could? What would happen in the aftermath? What would that say about him, that he was the only one to peer behind the artfully constructed person-suit the Ripper wore and see the dark, sordid truths beneath?

He considered his cork board that’d lain desolately empty for four years, purchased when he’d first gotten hired at Tattler News so that he could pin his accomplishments to it. What space was taken up, was taken up with the Chesapeake Ripper.

*Are serial killers your muse?*

The clove crackled in the cigarette, hissed as embers chewed through the paper.

*Dear Will,*

*There’s a killer out there that’s burying people alive. They found a gravesite with nine bodies, all fed intravenously with sugar water to keep them in a diabetic coma while fungi grew on their bodies. What kind of sick shit is that? There’s a manhunt for this guy, but no one can find him. What do you make of that?*
Dear Will,

Did you see the murder in Baltimore where someone shoved the neck of a cello down a guy’s throat? Crazy, right? What kind of guy does that?

-Umbre24

Dear Will,

I don’t know if I should be writing this to you, and I’m hoping you don’t post it in the column. The doctors will probably take away my computer time if they find out that I’m dwelling on something as morbid as you. I’m still confined to a psychiatric ward after everything that’s happened, but I’ve followed your column since almost the beginning.

Because of you, my father is dead.

I’m sure you’ve heard of me, the girl whose father murdered eight other girls in her stead. It was because of you that they found him, because of you that he panicked and killed my mother. I know that I should feel angry about this, but I don’t. In reality, I don’t feel much at all.

When you write about these people, characterize them and immortalize them in the written word, do you feel anything? Do you look at what you’ve said, look at what you’ve done and feel any form of remorse? Or are you there to simply take up space, entertain with your behaviors that led to the death of both of my parents, as well as the parents of the Mai’s?

I agreed to the terms of having your newspaper keep my e-mail unscrambled so that you can reply to me directly. Maybe I sound aggressive, but I’d honestly like to know. Is the only reason you can write about these people and not feel so horrible because you’re just like them?

Thank you,

-Abigail Hobbs

Will read the e-mail once, then twice; by the third time, he pushed the laptop away and fumbled with the cigarette, stubbing it out in the ashtray with shaky hands. His breath came short, and he was uncomfortable to realize that his palms were clammy, as though he’d endured a particularly uncomfortable social interaction.

Abigail Hobbs. The daughter of the Minnesota Shrike.

His watch beeped to tell him to take a walk. He ignored the notification in favor of pouring himself a drink instead.

Are serial killers your muse?

When he could control his breathing, he pulled the laptop back to himself and opened the black document once more, staring at the pulsing, faint line. With each blink, it drove her words home, barbs that sunk deep and pulled him closer and closer to the inevitable truth that he didn’t quite want to entertain.

Was the only reason he could write about these people because he was just like them?

Thinking of the knife that now sat in his messenger bag, unobtrusive when tucked away in a
sheath he’d found on Amazon for four bucks, he honestly couldn’t say either way.

- 

He was interrupted hours later from his musing by the piercing, sharp ring of his phone, the vibrations on his wrist jerking him out of his reverie. Often times, Will had to use the most obnoxious, loudest ringtone possible in order to ensure that he heard it, and it was with numb, heavy fingers that he answered the call.

“Graham here.”

“Graham, it’s Beverly. You want to get an eye on this guy sooner than a month?”

Her voice jerked him from the lulling thoughts he had of Mary Mai tracking her steps through her watch. He wondered if she strove to break her step record, or if simply maintaining was good enough for her dysmorphia. “Yeah.”

“I did a bit of digging, and it looks like there’s a gala in Baltimore this weekend. Some opera singer or other, a bit of art, and a Dr. Hannibal Lecter whose donation took top and center in the Baltimore Times since he’ll be in attendance.”

“Do you think I’m like him, Beverly?”

He was just buzzed enough that the question didn’t sound as sharp coming out of his mouth as it did in his head.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you think the reason I can write about people like this is because I’m like these people? Or do I just have a really really good imagination?”

Beverly took enough time to think on the answer that he honestly appreciated it. He roved away from the window and scowled at the laptop whose blank document page continued to mock him.

“You’ve always been a weird guy, Will. I’ve known you for years, and I’ve always thought that. You have a way of thinking about things that no one else does, but I think that has less to do with you being some kind of psychopath and more along the lines of you being a really good writer when you have the right incentive.”

“The right incentive being killers.”

“Well, everyone has their muse. Once upon a time, I was going to work in forensics until I realized I had more fun decrypting the written word of the general populace than decrypting hair follicles on the sleeve of a dead guy.”

“Everyone has their muse,” Will agreed.

Are serial killers your muse?

“Yeah, but I think that given enough push, you can empathize with anyone. Despite hating your wedding column, you still did it, right?”

“Wedding announcements,” he swore savagely. His fingers rolled the half-consumed cigarette around, tight enough to crush its cylindrical shape.
“Yeah. I asked you why you bothered, once. You said that when you saw the bride, you didn’t care. When you spoke with her, though, or when you spoke to the groom, their emotions spilled over, so much so that you began to be excited because of them. You don’t care about relationships and weddings and baby’s breath, but for a little while, you could channel their excitement about it—at least enough that you could write what was necessary.”

It was stark honest and realistic. He could work with that, clutch onto the string of hope that he could think like them because he could think like anybody if he cared enough.

The problem being that he hadn’t cared enough about anything for a long, long time.

“I’m not good at socializing,” he said at last, thinking of the gala. “Will you be my plus one?”

“Oh, you’re not taking Freddie along this time?” she asked sarcastically.

“She’d stand out in a snowstorm,” he replied. “I need someone that can hold a crowd while I keep an eye on the crowd. Your social skills are far better than hers or mine.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Please don’t be sour about her being here. If we’re looking into this because the FBI can’t go where we can, then it makes sense that we use someone that will go where we’re not willing to go.”

“You owe me a really high end liquor for this, you know that? You even had her in my house.”

“I’ll pick it up at the store after the gala,” he promised.

When he hung up, he cleared the notifications away on his watch sloppily. Get water. Eat dinner. Take a walk. Get water. Get ready for bed. Prepare for tomorrow. Go to bed. He’d ignored all of them in favor of scowling at his laptop, waiting for inspiration to strike.

Fucking writer’s block.

He closed the laptop lid with a little more force than was absolutely necessary. The word document sat blank. Unsaved.

- 

He responded to Abigail Hobbs. Work dragged, and his desk wobbled with a vicious mockery. He wondered if the Chesapeake Ripper would send another letter, now that he was actively searching for him, or if he would sit back and simply watch what Will decided to do.

“Mail time.”

Someone dropped a stack of mail on his desk, and Will nodded in thanks. A lot of fan mail, a lot of criticism. His watch buzzed with a notification that traffic was heavy due to a wreck on his normal route home.

Then a letter written in a very, very recognizable hand.

Dear Will,

Your words are touching, truly, as you’ve taken the infamy of the Chesapeake Ripper to new heights with your censure. Should you, instead, tell the masses of your own activities, sordid as they
are? Would they still love you, do you think?

Busy as I've no doubt kept you, I thought to give you something to sink your teeth into, to remind you just what it is to try and best someone like me.

What is all around us

and broken once we speak?

You have three days.

-Chesapeake Ripper

Will didn’t go to Charlie. His watch beeped to get water, and he filled his water bottle from the cooler before he was out of the door, waving dismissively to Beverly who watched with a confused, suspicious expression. He sent her a text as a peace offering.

Be back later, I have a lead.

He was three blocks down and stepping out into the street to hail a taxi when he heard a painfully familiar voice.

“You’re not going alone this time,” Freddie said, and stepped in front of him before he could move in front of oncoming traffic.

“You don’t know what I’m doing,” Will replied with far more snark than he meant.

“You’ve gotten a letter from the Ripper, and you’re not waiting around for someone to tell you not to go after it,” she said, and she folded her arms over her chest. “Every time there’s a letter, though, he escalates the situation. Can’t you see that?”

“If they’re already dead, someone needs to know.”

“And if they’re already dead, you should be calling Jack Crawford of the FBI, not racing after them.” She tilted her head, and in the bright afternoon sunlight, it made her eyes glint. “Don’t bullshit me, Graham. I know why you’re going alone, but I’m saying that if you’re going to bring us all together, you can’t give me the same lies you give Katz.”

“I didn’t lie to her,” he said defensively.

“But you didn’t tell her the whole truth, either. ‘I have a lead,’” she scoffed.

“Are you going to get out of my way, Freddie?”

“Are you going to keep wasting time when people could potentially be dying?” she fired back. “You know his time limits aren’t always honest.”

His watch buzzed to tell him that he’d been sitting for awhile. It sometimes did that, not always catching the few steps he’d taken just after getting up to move around. Will dismissed the small ‘Zzzz’ notification from his watch, then eyed Freddie with extreme prejudice. Where Beverly would allow him his odd tendencies of going off alone and going about his business, Freddie wasn’t much in the way of letting a lead get past her.

He let out a low, irritable growl, then handed her the letter. His free hand flexed, then drummed mindlessly against his leg, irritated.
She read it, reread it, then looked at him, eyebrow quirked.

“Silence,” he said when she made no comment.

“You know where to go?”

“The Silent Brother’s Monastery a mile outside of the city.”

Freddie snorted, then shook her head. “See, and I was thinking about the school for the deaf two miles south of here.”

Just behind her, a taxi slowed and Will waved his hand impatiently at it. It stilled, then swerved out of the way of other drivers to stop for them.

“So you go there, I go to the monastery,” he replied, and he snatched the letter from her. “Whoever is right gets a beer.”

“I don’t drink beer,” she said from the curb as he climbed in.

“Wine, spritzer, whatever,” he said, and he closed the door behind himself. Will would have liked to have claimed that he didn’t relish the look on her face as she watched the taxi driver pull away, but that would have been an outright lie. He’d been doing it so much, it least he could do was admit when he enjoyed being a pain in the ass for someone like her.

She sent him a text message with an emoticon of a middle finger, and he sent a thumb’s-up back.

The drive to the monastery wasn’t too far—traffic was hell going into the city at that time of day, not leaving it. Will held the paper so tightly that it crumpled up a bit, and he read and reread the riddle in an effort to ground himself rather than bounce about the walls in the back of the taxi.

“Going to meet someone?” the man driving asked. Will looked up, confused, and he explained, “When my wife leaves me notes in the morning, I hold onto them like that throughout the day. It makes me excited to be at the end of my shift.”

“…Yeah,” Will said, and he managed to smile after a beat. “Yeah, I’m meeting someone.”

“A friend?”

“A close friend.”

He thought to maybe relax his grip on the letter, but it didn’t last long before he was holding tight to it, studying the riddle again. He was right; he had to be.

He knew the Chesapeake Ripper better than Freddie did, surely.

The taxi slowed and turned them onto a small driveway, gravel and encased by rows upon rows of Magnolia trees, thick and normally waxy leaves browned and scattered across the ground. He thought of the white flowers that bloomed along the branches, the brides that wrapped them into bouquets. They bought the flowers from the monks here, and it was a wedding aesthetic to bind them in twine and let them rest in vases with an inch or so of water. They’d last for days like that, a wedding planner once promised him. The beauty of the magnolia flower would last for days in only an inch or so of water, holding on and spreading their petals wide for all to see.

They turned the corner and drove along the wraparound driveway. Off to the side, large
green houses contained herbs, trees, and plants that the brothers sold in order to make a living, and alongside that was a small shop containing books on Christianity and gardening.

“Just right here,” Will said, and he fished out enough cash, passing it through the open slot.

“Is your friend a silent brother?” the driver asked.

“Yes,” Will said, thoughtfully. “He very much is.”

He waited until the driver pulled away before he began his trek towards the church that sat in the distance, composed of grey stones and quiet dignity. Despite not putting any of his stock into religion, he had to admit that there was a quiet peace shrouding the monastery, gentle hills rolling down towards a lake where he spied a few Canadian geese getting their feathers wet. Statues of saints dotted along the grass that still clung to its green coloring, stone benches beside plaques that quoted scripture.

The church looked far more foreboding in the grey of Fall than it did in early spring when Will liked to sometimes visit. Clouds above settled low, bled into the stonework of the church and made the cross on top look somewhat like a weapon rather than a symbol of holiness. Will ascended the steps and took hold of the brass handle on the thick, wooden door. His heart hammered in his chest, and his breath caught in his throat as he opened the door, blessing the silence of the hinges as they swung and allowed him into the quiet of the chapel that smelled like rosewater and the fluttering pages of an old book.

Churches always filled Will with the sort of disquiet that they were supposedly meant to chase away. Their opulence and grandiose arches and stained windows that depicted saints that once preached humility and not needing riches in order to be close to God felt ironic somehow. His father had once tried to attend mass with him, when he was small. He’d swung his legs and drummed his fingers so loudly that a man in robes had hushed him from the aisle, stern and displeased.

There was no one to shush him as he entered, no preaching or singing. A quick glance at his watch told him that there was no mass currently, but there was a distinct lack of any noise save the sound of his shoes on the worn stone as he walked past the first set of pews and came to a stop at a small, wooden gate that led towards rows of more pews resting on either side, facing one another as well as a strip of red carpet that led to an altar. Jesus Christ was nailed to the wooden cross above the altar, eyes downcast, pained over the stone slab.

No body rested on the altar. Just a simple cloth.

“Dammit,” he murmured, and the hushing whisper of his voice carried over the silence that pressed too strong, too harsh in the otherwise quiet. Freddie must have been right.

He turned to leave, hands clammy and heart pounding far too harshly for failure. He exhaled, loud and biting, and made his way towards the doors. The brothers must have been somewhere else, doing what those who lived in silence did. Ironically, he paused beside the dish of holy water where one could trace the cross with their fingers across their body –his father hadn’t stuck around religion long enough for Will to figure out why. Maybe if they’d stayed with the church, he wouldn’t have turned out like this.

Maybe.

He dipped his fingers in the bowl, then paused as he looked, really looked at it. Holy water was clear, and he recalled the dish he’d seen once depicting the Virgin Mary at the bottom of the water, rippling and otherwise merciful as the people murdered her son.
There was no such design that he could see in this bowl, seeing how it was filled instead with blood.

He withdrew his fingers, stared at the way that it beaded and slid along his fingers, gliding along his palm. In the gloom of the church, it took on an interesting sort of color, not entirely red but not yet dark enough for burgundy. His heart lurched, strained in his chest, and he looked about, swallowing down a noise of surprise and --dare he say-- excitement. There was no one to witness his harried footsteps as he peeked along the pews and checked the closet in the corner. He whirled around, palms tingling, and when he spied the confessional booth off to the side, he didn't walk so much as he ran to the doors of it, opening them both at once.

On the left, hands pressed to the grate between the confessor and the priest, a man with a wild array of curly brown hair sat in silence, black cloth tied about his mouth, silencing him. His eyes were glazed in death, his skin holding a dusty pallor. The smell hit Will hard, disrupting the rosewater.

On the right, a man that was very much alive sat with glazed, confused eyes. He was bound to his chair with rope that Will recognized as a particularly effective material for making netting to catch fish. Over his mouth, a similar black cloth was tied --the muffled noise gave away the gag that must have been shoved to the back of his throat.

It took Will far too long to shake off the victory as well as the panic before he could untie him and ungag him.

"Are you hurt?" Will asked, voice ragged. The inside of the booth was snug with the two of them, but his fingers fumbled with the knots as the man let out a pained whine and tried to ease the pain in his jaw and mouth. The air reeked of urine and body odor.

"I…I…" he shuddered, eyes rolling into the back of his head as he tried to catch his breath and take control of what was happening around him. "P-please…I…"

Will helped him up and out of the chair, then led him to a pew to sit down. His robes were stiff from dried sweat and other bodily fluids, his hair flat against his head.

"I’m going to call for help," he said to the man as he took his pulse. Too slow for comfort. "How long were you in there?"

"Please…" the man murmured, and he slumped down into the pew, dazed.

"Wait here," said Will, as though the man would go anywhere else. He stepped out of the church and gulped in the cold, wet air outside, tingles gliding along his skin with short, electric bursts.

Then he called Freddie.

She picked up on the first ring, and he said, "You owe me a beer."

There was a long, pregnant pause.

"Actually, you owe me a glass of wine," she replied, and something in her tone made him tense. "Unless you found a dead body strapped to a sound-cancelling device with a man tied up just inches away from being able to release him."

The blood in his veins froze.
“…No, but I found a corpse in the confessional booth with the priest on the other side, tied up and near-death,” he said, and his voice sounded tinny even to him, off.

They were both quiet, unable to quite bring to words the way the implications of their successes made them feel.

“How you called the cops?” she asked, the first to speak. “I’ve got them on the way.”

“Yeah,” Will lied, and as he stood on the steps and tried to forget the smell of dried urine and sweat, he had to resist the urge to go back inside to see what could be seen before anyone else came to muck up what could arguably be called a gift to him. “Yeah, they’re on their way.”

When he hung up the phone, Will would have liked to have claimed that he called the cops immediately after. In truth, it took far too long for him to muster up the ability to dial the number, let alone convey his words to the operator that answered.

Chapter End Notes

A tad later in the day for my normal updates, but this was done in a Starbucks while cramming a Chonga Bagel into my mouth tbh :) I apologize for any errors.

A special thanks to my patrons: Emily Elm, Matilda, Sylarana, Inky-Starlight, Duhaunt6, and Superlurk! You make this possible!

Thank you to all who have helped signal boost this, promote this, and give this the love that has inspired me to keep it up. You honestly mean so much!!

Check out Marlahanni's beautiful, lovely cover art for this fic!! She was so kind to do this, and it looks amazing <3
Chapter 9:

He wasn’t surprised to see Jack Crawford’s SUV as one of the first to pull up. He wasn’t at all surprised to see his snarling scowl as he bulldozed past a lovely flowerbed of persistent roses, nor was he surprised when Jack ordered him at least one hundred yards away from the crime scene.

Will planted himself beneath a Magnolia tree weeping its leaves, and he let Jack Crawford work. He counted himself lucky that he didn’t have to wait in handcuffs.

He’d already gleaned what he could from the scene, combed each inch with a fervor as the monk dozed, half-delirious from dehydration and starvation.

Just how long have you been here?

*Mmmnn…*

Did you see who did this?

*Nnngh…*

There wasn’t much that he could get from him. Granted, if he’d been tied there for days, it made all the sense that he wasn’t altogether there, but it was troublesome. Will had hoped for some sort of information regarding the Ripper. As he passed a browned leaf between his hands and idly disintegrated it, Will was more than capable of realizing quite a few things about his situation, despite the lack of help from the monk:

1. The fact that he was more interested in getting information from the man that attempting to treat him said *a lot* about his character.
2. The man that was dead was most certainly Will, reaching and grasping to rip apart the metal grate that separated them.
3. The Chesapeake Ripper was somehow constrained from merely revealing his person –Will attributed that sentiment to his refusal to make this too easy. *That would spoil the fun.*
4. Will’s ease in accepting that *also* said a lot about his character.
5. He wasn’t intended to find both locations.

It was obvious in its simplicity. In giving him three days for something he’d figured out in the first day, there was the implication that surely he’d have had *time* to find both locations, should he have known about them. However, in finding the monastery –Will attributed that to the Ripper having followed him here at some point –he wouldn’t think to look anywhere else. Given his general solidarity in these things, there normally would have been a lack of a second body to think of something that he hadn’t.

Jack Crawford made his way across the lush grass and loam, and Will avoided his furious scowl.

“You know, I’m getting really tired of this shit,” he said by way of greeting.

“Me too,” Will lied.
“Are you? Because it doesn’t look that way. It looks like you’ve gotten in too deep and you
don’t know which end is up. That’s the only way that I can figure you’re still crawling into a
situation that you really don’t have a grasp of. That, or you really are like Lounds, grasping for that
one shred of news that makes you important for another day.”

Jack Crawford knew how to really dig in an insult when he was worked up. Will’s watch
beeped with a text from Lounds, but he ignored it in keeping furious eye contact with Jack.

“I know which end is up,” he said, and he chewed his words around before he added, “I also
know you couldn’t wipe your ass with the information you have right now.”

“You think you’ve seen something that I haven’t?”

“He’s eating them,” Will revealed, and the look on Jack’s face would stay with him for days,
something both shell-shocked and utterly disgusted. “He’s taken kidneys, liver, lungs…intestines.”

“You think that the Chesapeake Ripper is making sausage?” he asked derisively.

“No hide or tail of organs cropping up in dumpsters, right? He wouldn’t be so elaborate if he
was just selling them. Are you looking into doctors or those with medical background?”

Jack looked like he sorely wanted to cuss, and he began pacing. His shoes made an ugly
squishing noise in the grass.

“Of course we are,” he ground out. “Of course we are, Will.”

Of course they were. They just weren’t looking the way that Will was looking—that is, they
weren’t looking for someone that was kind enough to leave dinner as well as a taunt. The
Chesapeake Ripper wanted Will to find him—why else would he leave such an easy bread trail?

That didn’t mean Will wanted to find him with Jack close on his heels, though.

“Lounds found another scene at the same time that I did,” he finally revealed as Jack paced.
“She’ll have called the police.”

The look he gave Will seared flesh and burned crops to dust. His lip twitched into a snarl,
and he looked away, out towards the church where paramedics had already rushed away with the
monk, their flashing lights long gone. Forensics gleaned over the body inside, and random agents
roved about outside, searching for any clues.

“Lounds,” he swore under his breath, and Will’s lip twitched a little.

“He meant for me to find it alone…he’s upping the stakes, like you said. I may have saved
one and felt good, until another newspaper revealed a second crime scene with two more dead.”

"The other brothers are away on a religious retreat," Jack murmured, although to himself or
to Will, Will couldn’t say. "These two were left to watch the monastery."

"Not anymore," Will replied.

Will’s fingers drummed in the damp earth as he tried to focus, his mind attempting to leap to
another place entirely. The Ripper. The Gala. The monk. The Game. The game with Jack, the game
with the Ripper, the game with Lounds. He had to play it cool, though, if he was going to continued
placating Jack. He couldn’t rile him up too much, otherwise he’d be stuck with a tail and a
surveillance van outside of his work rather than just his house.
God, this was a damn good game. Almost too good.

“What do you think?” Jack asked after a long moment of thought. Giving in looked painful on him because it must have been a bitter pill to swallow to realize that his best hopes lay in a man whose schedule was determined by just how loud those beeps could beep before Will noticed and got his cup of water on time. Will almost felt a bit bad for him, thinking about it like that. He wasn’t a reliable sort—never had been.

“I think he’s right under our noses,” Will said quietly. “I think he’s been there this whole time, quiet enough to keep you unsuspicuous, but prominent enough that people take notice. He’s going to be arrogant, Jack, charismatic.”

“That rules you out,” Jack grunted.

“You too,” Will assured him with a lopsided grin. “We don’t perform for strangers, but this guy… he does. Medical, surgical, hell; he could be part of law enforcement somewhere—maybe military, but unless he’s got a cozy job that’d be too risky for him to have to jump up and go overseas at the drop of the hat.”

“You think law enforcement?”

“To keep the run on you, he’d need to have… intimate knowledge of the crime scenes, wouldn’t he? He’d know how to swoop around you, stay just enough outside of your gaze that you won’t see it.”

Jack ruminated on that while Will plucked blades of grass from beside him and laid them out in neat rows. From shortest to longest they lay, and he dragged his fingers along them before he picked one up and twirled it. After a cursory glance to Jack, he lifted it up and pressed it between his thumbs, adjusting it before he put his mouth to the small gap and let out a shrill, squawking whistle sound.

Jack gave a jolt and turned around to glare at him.

“If I was like Lounds, do you think I’d have told you that?” he asked kindly, wiggling the blade of grass in the air. He didn’t want to admit just how much it stung to be compared to Lounds.

Jack let out a grunt. “You’re not like Lounds,” he relented. “You’re something else, though, Will, and I don’t know quite what it is. I don’t think I like it, though, unless it’s helping me catch this guy. That’s what you’re doing, right? You’re trying to help me catch this guy?”

“'Course I am, Jack,” Will said, and he pushed himself up to his feet so that he could properly shake his hand. He let the blade of grass flutter to the ground, getting caught on the cold breeze to go wherever it may. “I’m trying to catch this guy, same as you. Promise.”

Getting ready for a gala or anything of remote opulence wasn’t much of a concern for someone like Will. He shaved, he combed his hair, and he used a slightly more expensive cologne than normal. It’d sat in the back of his medicine cabinet for months, a gift from a distant relative he occasionally got Christmas cards from. There wasn’t much in the way of his caring too much about his appearance—he wasn’t going to be under scrutiny by any means. His watch beeped to show a message from Beverly saying that she was there. Better her car than his, he supposed, since his was a beat-up truck he’d picked up from a farmer somewhere near GWU.

When he walked down the steps of the apartment, Beverly whistled, low and appreciative.
Her own sheath dress was snug, form-fitting and elegant, and her hair had been twisted into the sort of knot Will knew several women at the office had slaved over while watching Pinterest how-to’s.

“Mr. Graham, you look almost upper-middle class,” she praised. “Did you comb your hair?”

“I did,” he affirmed.

“Oh, I think the comb got stuck back there,” she said, circling him. “How long has it been since you took a brush to this?”

“Probably too long.” He sighed, itched under her scrutiny. “Is it good enough for a gala?”

“Most certainly.”

She got his door for him since Beverly wasn’t the type to let just anyone drive her car, and they headed towards Baltimore with Google maps leading the way. He shifted, adjusted his seat, and fiddled with the air vents, a nervous energy radiating just under his skin. He wasn’t all that good in a crowd, let alone a crowd in which he was hunting for a cannibalistic serial killer. The rest of the week was spend dreaming of the confessional box, razor wire between him and his desires.

“How do you think you’ll find him?”

Will had thought on that ever since she’d mentioned the gala. “They mingle before and after. I’ll move through the crowd, try and see if I can at least hear his voice or hear mention of his name.”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked, batting his hand away from adjusting the AC once more.

“Be a buffer for me, if you don’t mind.”

“Does the great Will Graham abhor socializing?”

He nodded curtly and looked out of the window, drumming his fingers on his leg. “You remember in college, when we had to sit in front of a panel and defend our thesis?”

“Oh, yes. The amount of alcohol you ingested that night to get over just how abysmal your public speech was particularly legendary.”

He nodded miserably. His watch beeped to remind him to drink a glass of water. He reached down for the plastic Nalgene container at his feet and took a gulp.

“What did you tell the one lady? ‘There’s no accounting for taste’ when she asked you what you thought of her particular dislike of your stance?”

“I felt defensive.”

“And when you get defensive, you bite.” Beverly snickered and changed the station on the radio. “At work parties, you keep to the buffet table and have your hands full at all times with food so that you have an excuse to have your mouth full so that you don’t have to talk.”

“An unfortunate side effect of my social graces.”

“I don’t mind being a buffer for you, Graham, since you definitely need it. These people aren’t the type to take offenses lightly.”

He caught onto her tone immediately. “Do you take offenses lightly?”
“Lighter than most,” she said, and the glance she gave him was coy. “I forgive you.”

“I didn’t expect her to follow me.”

“At least you gave me the Q&A for my blog,” she said with a slight shrug. “She got front page, but I’ve got subscribers on my blog now.”

Will frowned, puzzled. “I didn’t know you had a blog.”

“Wake up, Graham; there’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

That was true. She said it teasingly, but he noted that as the car fell to the obscene noises of her tunelessly humming to the radio, he had to wonder if, at her core, she was somewhat like Lounds—enough to not necessarily talk to Will should she decide to do her own investigative journalism.

The idea of that left him with something a little sour in the back of his mouth—jealousy, with a mild sense of unease. The Chesapeake Ripper was playing a game with him, not Beverly.

Just how did he feel about Lounds stepping in? Will’s reply to his actions wouldn’t hit the papers for another few days. Unless he was watching the news, keeping up on the times, he wouldn’t know just how involved Beverly and Freddie actually were.

At least the ratings still looked good. Better. Definitely better.

Thankfully, in a place like the upscale side of Baltimore, Will was a nameless face in the crowd. Unless the Chesapeake Ripper spotted him first, there would be no one in Baltimore of all places that would take notice of him and make a scene. As they sidled around other men and women in striking outfits ranging from gauche to elegantly refined, he was buffeted about by their lack of interest in his person. Upper-middle class, Beverly called it. High enough on the social ladder to look like he could be there, but not so rich in appearance that he would turn heads. He took his glasses off, to better focus on the people around him.

“You know, despite this being a work-related sort of endeavor, this is really nice,” she commented, craning her neck to look about. “And without glasses, you look like you could deal in some kind of online business with Amazon.”

“Amazon has good benefits,” he said, and he adjusted his jacket idly. Tattler News had shit benefits.

It was a nice place though, even he had to admit. The entryway opened up to a large, marbled foyer held upright by columns with beautiful oil paintings gracing every so many open spaces. Embroidered chairs and benches rested along a wall of large, elegant windows framed by heavy drapes, and a sign said that the curtains were to remain closed during daylight hours, to better preserve the art.

He was led by the crowd to a large room with a simplistic stage and padded seats arranged in organized rows. Closer towards the front, chairs had been roped off with reserved seating signs, men with red cummerbunds guarding each row with the vested interest of a decent paycheck apparent in the expression in their eyes.

“Those ushers probably won’t let us close enough to check out the names on the chairs,” Beverly said with a dismal sigh.

“Probably not.”
“Where do you want to lurk, then?”

Will, abhorring the idea of being surrounded on all sides, chose a spot along the back row where he’d have a good enough vantage point to keep an eye on as many people as possible. He looked over the crowd, a complex blend of hairspray, perfumes, and essential oils dabbed behind the ears, and starched collars.

“You think you’ll find him sitting all the way back here?” Beverly wondered.

“No, but I’ll get a feel for the room,” he replied. That, and he’d be able to take in the number of people in a dose far less terrifying to consider. Over two hundred people milled about, sitting down as the lights flickered overhead, and their voices washed over him, leaving his neck hot and the back of his shirt damp with sweat.

The smells in the air burned his nose, mixed with the cologne and left his nose itching, angry. He wondered if it would mask the scent of his sweat, uncomfortable as he was. He shifted in his chair, crossed a leg impatiently. It was going to be a long night.

The lights dimmed, and he fidgeted once more as a woman crossed the small stage, a smattering of applause flitting over the crowd as she smiled and accepted a microphone from the conductor.

No one leapt to the stage to slaughter the opera singer, although Will half-hoped they might – if only to more easily find the Ripper, of course. As she began to sing, notes carrying along the swell of the music with perfected ease, Will found himself swept away by the sensations of the crowd. With every dip of the music, every curling note and dimming percussion, their emotions grew and faded, pushed and pulled. Throats tightened, hands clenched, and he imagined them all as a single entity of emotion, bubbling and churning with need. If he pressed hands to his ears, would he still feel the love they held in the moment, suspended as they were within the space the singer had created for them?

As unseen as he was, in that moment it didn’t quite hurt Will Graham to see.

One man in particular was moved by the singing, so much so that he wept freely, overcome as he was with the way the woman swept them away with a siren’s call. Will wasn’t quite sure if he didn’t often get the chance to see such talent displayed in person, or if he was simply in touch with his emotions the way that Will never could be. Either way, there was something bewitching about it, witnessing his feelings with such open frankness, like peeking behind the curtain to something forbidden. It was intimate in its openness.

She finished; the lights brightened, and the man was the first to his feet, his applause carrying over the crowd. The sound of it, coupled with the tracks of tears down his cheek, seemed to take hold of Will, dragging him to his feet so that he could clap, too. Beverly glanced to him, then followed suit as the rest of the patrons stood, applauding and whistling to the woman that bowed gracefully on stage.

“I didn’t know that you loved opera so much,” Beverly said.

“I do,” Will murmured, “very much.”

The man, as if sensing Will’s intent stare, turned his head to the side and caught his gaze. He inclined his head slightly, acknowledging him, then turned and began to walk away as the patrons moved about.
Will, without hesitation, followed him.

“Will, what are you-”

“Will Graham?!”

A short, portly man in a tuxedo presented himself to Will, stopping him in his tracks just short of bowling him over. His smile was wide, his eyes dancing across Will’s appearance with eager attention. Just behind him, a taller, lithe man stood as a quiet companion, his own expression of dour disinterest a sharp contrast to his companion, the reluctant witness.

“…Yes?” Will took a step back at the feelings washing over him, excitement coupled with the faint scent of deodorant that’d quit working an hour ago.

“I’m sorry, you don’t know me, but I’m Franklyn Froideveaux. I read your column in Tattler News!”

“What?” Will, harried, looked away from the man melting into the crowd, balking under Franklyn’s scrutiny as he took a step closer. Instinctively, he took another step back.

“Imagine you here! Are you –oh my god, are you –you’re-” he stopped himself to stage whisper –“you’re working?”

“Let the poor man enjoy his opera, Franklyn. He looks positively overcome with what he’s witnessed.” His friend admonished. There was a kind smile on his face, but when Will glanced to him, the emotion was devoid from his eyes –if anything, Will would call the expression in the dark recesses of his iris something much like disdain, a quiet joke for him and Will alone at the expense of his friend. Will wasn’t the only one uncomfortable with the intrusion.

“Tobias, oh you –how rude of me, sorry, Mr. Graham.” Franklyn paused to take a breath, pressing a hand to his crisp button-up shirt. “This is my good friend Tobias Budge.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Graham,” Tobias said, eyes glittering with mirth.

“A pleasure, Mr. Budge.”

“Are you working?” Franklyn asked. “Am I keeping you from work?”

“As if he could say if he was gaining insight to killers while in a place like this,” Tobias noted.

“Yes, true, true! We all gain pleasure from the arts, even journalists!”

Just behind him, Will could feel Beverly’s amused snort ripple against his suitcoat, and he let out a quiet, indiscernible sigh. It seemed she wasn’t keen on becoming a buffer between him and someone like Franklyn.

“Yes, even journalists.”

“We shouldn’t keep him,” Tobias prompted. Franklyn seemed the type that needed to be prompted, and prompted often.

“Oh, yes, yes! I’m sorry, it’s just not every day you meet someone whose writing you admire! Do you get this often, Mr. Graham?” There was hardly a pause as Franklyn took a short breath. “Ah, no, no! There I go again! I’m sorry, it’s just such a pleasure to meet you!”
“Thank you,” Will managed. He cast a glance about the room, unsurprised to see that the man who’d commanded his very legs to move was gone. It was a bitter sort of taste on his tongue at the thought that this random stranger could get in the way of his goals, but the sour taste worsened as he thought on the fact that a complete stranger’s behavior could even inspire such behavior from him in the first place. They stood, and he stood. They applauded, and he followed. They met his eyes, and he found himself crossing the room to speak to them.

Rather, trying to.

“Come along, Franklyn,” Tobias prompted lightly. The mocking, indulgent expression in his eyes remained, and he glanced over Will’s appearance casually. “We’ll leave Mr. Graham to his own business.

“Yes, of course Tobias, yes. It’s just been the most eventful of evenings. First I bumped into Delilah, then Dr. Lecter, now Will Graham of all people! I just-”

The mention of Dr. Lecter grabbed Will’s attention, and he looked back to them, a half-step from making his escape. “Dr. Lecter?” he asked, sharper than intended. The curt sound of his syllables took Franklyn aback, and he nodded slowly, once.

“Yes…he’s…” His voice trailed off, then he laughed and shrugged. “He’s my therapist. I ran into him here.”

“That is just the man I was wanting to see,” Will said slowly. He contained his tone, wrapped it into something more curious than curt. “Do you happen to know where he is?”

“Why, did he kill someone?” Franklyn joked. Will, for all his lack of understanding of general social graces, could pick up on the tone and know it for what it was. The question rubbed him wrong, though, made him itch in places he knew he’d never reach

“A loaded question,” Tobias said with a wry smile.

Will didn’t return it.

“He’s a psychiatrist, and I wanted to know if he’d give me insight to my column,” he said instead, tracing the pulse at Franklyn’s neck with his gaze. “He is rather respected, to my understanding.”

“Yes, yes! Let me see if I see him here, let me…” Franklyn rocked onto the balls of his feet and looked about himself, a grand gesture from an innocent desire to help.

Will looked about as well, as though he could will this Dr. Lecter into view with desire alone. It was then that he realized Beverly was nowhere in sight, having abandoned her post for God knew what. The lack of presence at his back made him feel oddly exposed, vulnerable, and his breath hitched as he spun about, craning to catch even just the top of her head to ground himself.

Someone bumped him, and he stepped back, trodding on Franklyn’s foot unceremoniously. Franklyn squawked in surprise, and Will jumped away with a clumsy apology, bumping into someone else who sent him turning on his heel. He righted himself, managed another apology to someone who cast him a dark look, and the sudden feeling of too many bodies far too close made his throat tighten, made his breath hitch.

Where the fuck was Beverly?

“Mr. Graham are you-”
“I have to go,” he blurted, steamrolling Franklyn’s concern without care. “Thank you, but I have to go.”

He walked away before Franklyn could protest, before he could even bother an apology at the rudeness of it.

He wasn’t kind in his escape through the crowd to make his way outside. The chatter, the voices, the potent smell of far too many perfumes, and the heat of far too many bodies made him dizzy, made his palms hot as he skirted around a waiter bearing champagne flutes, and when he finally reached the doors to the exit, his breath was a balloon stuck in his ribs, threatening to burst from him. He burst through the doors and heaved an exhale, casting his eyes every which way for Beverly.

She was nowhere in sight.

“Fuck,” he hissed, and his hands grasped his phone too tight in his pocket, hauling it up so that he could call her. He tapped harshly at the screen, uttered another curse when he hit a useless app rather than the phone icon, and he lifted the phone to his ear, uncertain as to why he felt a tingle of dread slither down his spine at her sudden disappearance. His feet carried him down the steps, past pillars whose shadows cast malevolent shards of black along the walkway.

He was then startled by an arm that snaked around his waist in order to press a knife to his gut.

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to my lovely patrons: Emily Elm, Sylarana, Matilda, Inky-Starlight, Duhaunt6 and Superlurk -you’re the best!!

And another huge thanks to all of you reading and enjoying this fic! I basically can’t wait to unfold each ridiculous aspect of this Will Graham to you all until it culminates into the huge bomb going off towards the climactic point. :) He’s a dark!Will to be sure.

I’m so sorry for the late chapter update --I just got a promotion at work that has increased work hours, coupled with a trip to another store to support them (thirteen hours on that shift omg) and then getting wrapped up for HOURS at a car dealer to buy a new car (count ’em --5:00 PM-1:00 AM until we actually got home) but at least I’ve got this new electric car to save money on gas for. What-what. :)
Chapter 10:

There are many things one should feel when realizing their life is quite literally being held within the grasp of another. Fear, for one, as they look down to the muted steel that, for all intents and purposes could gut them as easily as one bit into bread. Confusion, as they wondered just who would bother to press a knife against their stomach, an exposed and vulnerable part of their body. Potentially, there was the aspect of betrayal as they looked to the eyes of the person that was soon to end them, cruel as they were with their handling of something much like trust.

Will Graham felt no such thing. He knew precisely who would dare press a knife to such a vulnerable place, a place that he himself had once taken a knife to on someone else.

“Looking for someone?” The Chesapeake Ripper breathed into his ear.

He considered many things that he could have done, and days later he would still chastise himself for the way he tensed rather than turn and fight. He wasn’t much of a fighter, though; not in the way of physical strength, of course. He was a writer for God’s sake, and he had an arsenal of other things he could use instead, although with the heat of a serial killer pressed taut against him, the point of his knife against Will’s belly, it was difficult to think of things like arsenals and fighting and writers.

He licked his lips, bemoaned his sudden cotton-mouth.

“I should have known you’d be a fan of the arts,” Will managed to say. His voice came out wrong, though, dusty like a book that’d sat too long on the shelf.

“Her voice was both passionate and contained, controlled and ardently let loose,” the Ripper—Hannibal Lecter?—replied.

“Do you have Beverly?”

“Do I?”

Silence as they waited one another out. The call went to voicemail, and when he lowered his arm to pocket his phone, the Chesapeake Ripper let him. He contemplated reaching to touch the knife, but he didn’t want to push his luck on the off-chance that the Ripper would gut him just to see what it’d look like so close. The Ripper may have wanted to play a game, but he probably wouldn’t like the odds not being in his favor when it came time to contemplate winning or losing.

“Where would I put her if I had her, Mr. Graham? Do you suppose I keep a trunk closeby to stuff unsuspecting persons inside?”

“She’s not part of our game.”

“She was the moment you decided to bring her along.”

He opened his mouth to object, but he stopped himself, words choking up in his throat. The idea of Beverly getting hurt because of him, dying because of him, made the idea of a game nasty,
ugly with its realities. He glanced down to the knife that pricked through his dress shirt, and he nodded.

“What now, then?” he asked quietly. “Are you going to kill me?”

“That is a boring question. Come now, you can do better than that.”

“It’s not.” Will grunted when the knife dug in ever-so-slightly. “Really, it’s not. I’m sure you’ve thought about it—the many ways in which you’d kill Will Graham.”

“I have,” The Chesapeake Ripper agreed.

“I mean, are you going to kill me now. Is this already the end to our game? A knife to my gut, dead on the steps of an art hall in Baltimore?”

“Do you suppose you have a better place and time in which to die?”

Will laughed a little and looked away from the knife and the arm draped around him, clad in a wool coat to protect against the chill. He swallowed heavily, staring out into the darkness of the evening. His vision burned into a lamp that dimly lit an area just out of reach of him being seen by anyone else, should they come outside.

“If you were being ironic, you’d at least do it in an alleyway,” he decided.

“An irony of ironies,” the Ripper agreed again.

Will shifted against the stance just behind him, the heat of the Ripper burning through his suitcoat. “Too easy, though. A knife is too easy for you.”

The Ripper hummed, low and throaty. “It’s served many a purpose for me. Better a knife than a gun.”

“When you kill me, I’d much prefer for you to use your bare hands.”

The Ripper’s breath stilled against his back, and the knife cut through Will’s undershirt in order to press against his skin. Instinct cried that he shift away, but he held still, unwilling to give the bastard the satisfaction of a reaction. The breath that’d teased the hairs at the nape of his neck paused, and he found himself also holding his breath, waiting—for what, he couldn’t quite say.

“Would you want it to be so intimate as that?” the Ripper wondered aloud.

“Yes.”

The Ripper exhaled slowly, a sweet sort of sound in the back of his throat.

“How would you want me to kill Beverly Katz? Would you wish her death to be as intimate?” he asked coarsely.

A barb, one designed to cut through his forced measure of calm. He didn’t want to acknowledge just how much he succeeded, needling deep with the thought that he very much held one of his only friend’s life in his stupidly incapable hands.

“The readers wouldn’t like that,” he murmured quietly.

“The readers?” There was a pause. “Ah, yours or hers?”
“Both. Mine because they’d want my head on a platter, and hers because she gives good advice when people are smart enough to listen.”

“You do yourself no favors with such rebukes,” the Ripper admonished lightly. “I’m sure the readers would simply be happy to know that at least they have the advantage of witnessing such horrors without getting too close. There is safety in reveling in the macabre without having to bloody your own hands. That is why crime shows are so popular among the general public.”

“Everyone loves a good psychopath,” Will murmured.

“Everyone?” the Ripper wondered. “Even you?”

He had nothing to say to that. Tense as he was, unwilling to move even an inch, at the sound of a door behind them closing, he jolted and winced as the knife broke skin. The Ripper shifted until they were further behind the column, out of sight of anyone that didn’t know where to look, and Will followed along because despite being many things, stupid wasn’t one of them.

“Of course he’s not answering his phone, he’s probably hiding from his avid fans,” Beverly said descending the steps. Her phone was pressed tight to her ear as she paused at the bottom, looking about with only the barest of cares. She wasn’t entirely invested in her hunt. “I’m only answering because it was an excuse to get away from that woman, Octavia-something-or-other. She’s always dogging me for advice in the column. I saw her and ran.”

Will watched with dread as she walked about, unheeding of their presence or the fact that her life was very much in the balance. As if sensing his thoughts, the Ripper leaned over his shoulder to press his mouth to his ear.

“I could kill her right now, and she wouldn’t realize it until it was happening,” he whispered. His breath made Will’s skin tingle.

“Too easy,” Will chided, equally quiet.

“He probably put it on silent for the show; as attached to his watch as he is, he’s not really all that attached to the rest of his technology,” Beverly continued. She paused and wrapped an arm around her ribs to stave off the cold.

“How would you do it, Will Graham? How would you kill Beverly Katz?”

“I don’t think about things like that,” Will snapped, just soft enough to be a whisper. The knife dug in, an odd, muted burn that felt more along the lines of a cat scratch.

“Don’t you?”

Didn’t he? Will chewed on the inside of his mouth, considered the way he’d sat on a mountain for hours, wondering at the death of Mary Mai. How many times, in the push and lull of his thoughts, had he wondered the method in which the Chesapeake Ripper had killed her? While he wasn’t privy to the forensic aspect of it, he was left to his own imagination, and that alone was almost as terrifying as the reality.

“I think you do,” the Ripper chided. They tracked Beverly’s wandering steps as she listened to whoever was on the other end of the line, head dipped to expose the beginning of her vertebrae. The elegant line of her dress on her back made it appear especially vulnerable, on display for just anyone to sink a knife into. “I think that it takes only the barest of nudges to make you fall into the sordid crevices of your mind that you like to pretend don’t exist.”
“I’ll go and find him, but we’re in the middle of something, Freddie. If he calls back tonight, it won’t be until later.”

“Tell me how you’d kill her in this moment.” He paused as if to savor the shudder that ran down Will’s spine. “I’ll let her live if you do.”

A taunt, all things considered. Will swallowed heavily, but as he opened his mouth, there was a cold sensation of truth as his mind clicked into place, making connections in the heat of the moment.

“I took you by surprise, didn’t I?” he realized, tracking Beverly’s progression down the sidewalk as she chided Freddie. Her voice faded to garbled and indistinct words. “You had to slip away to hide from me in a public space. You panicked, and this was your ham-handed plan.”

“I was well aware that you were trying to find me.” He allowed the change of subject, the twist of amusement in his tone obnoxious at best. There was something else, though, something that caught and stuck in Will’s ears.

“Yeah, but you didn’t expect me to find you here. This feels…rather quickly thought out, don’t you think? Wait for me to try and hunt you down, put a knife to my gut in the shadows…” Will felt the way in which the Ripper aligned himself perfectly along his back, each inch of him taut and prepared to strike should he fight back too soon. “Threatening to kill Beverly because this honestly startled you, didn’t it? The same way that it surprised you when Freddie Lounds and I found both of your crime scenes.

“I think you’re delving too far into your own Thriller genre, Mr. Graham.”

Be it the way his voice wavered, the way his accent seemed to stumble on the words and catch at the consonants, but despite the knife pressed to his gut, Will smiled.

“I can’t always be as predictable as you think I am,” he said.

There was a long pause at that, as Beverly irritably finished her phone call and hung up, tucking her phone into her clutch. The faint, delicate gold chain caught the light of the moon and glinted as she set it over her shoulder, and her heels made sharp, staccato noises as she headed up the steps to go back inside. Will tracked her movement, and when she opened the doors towards the safety of the public masses, he laughed.

Then, Will Graham turned around in the Ripper’s grasp to better grab him by the lapels of his jacket, slamming him back against the pillar.

It wasn’t without some loss. As he turned, the knife sliced clean across his stomach, although it didn’t feel too deep. Pressed so close to him, chest-to-chest, Will relished in the sting of skin splitting, the wet sensation of his own blood beading and clinging to his dress shirt. That close he could smell the Ripper’s cologne, a faint whiff of blood and frankincense in the air. They shared the same breath, pressed that close, and Will thought of the sordid act they’d once shared, tipping their heads back in the dark so that they could consume something even God shamed.

Although he was quick, so was the Ripper. The knife glided up to press to the top of his throat, and his free hand clapped over Will’s eyes, obscuring his vision. They both froze at that, equal parts surprise and adrenaline, and Will let out a huff of breath, his heart screaming. He gripped the Ripper’s lapels tightly, violently.

“You’re not predictable,” the Ripper said, and despite still having the upper-hand with a knife
to the tip of Will’s chin, he didn’t make a move to end him just yet. “You may take some comfort in
that.”

“I could drag you out into the light right now,” Will said, and a snarl rippled past his lips. The
hand pressed against his eyes twitched. “A convincing cry for help to bring someone running.”

“You won’t.”

“It’d be a nice twist, don’t you think?”

“A nice twist,” the Ripper agreed, and the knife dug in ever-so-slightly. “However, you are
not the sacrificial type, nor am I.”

“I won’t die to save people from you, and you won’t let yourself be caught for the sake of my
desires,” Will said quietly.

“A stalemate, then. The difference being, Mr. Graham, that you have something here to lose.
As of right now, I don’t.”

Will’s fingers curled tighter into his lapels, and he drew closer, letting the blade sink ever-so-
slightly into his skin. “This is our game.”

“Are you not the sharing type?”

“No.”

“Nor am I,” the Ripper revealed. After a beat, the knife was removed from his throat,
although the hand wasn’t removed from in front of his eyes. Will sucked in another shaky breath,
marked the muted click of the knife closing back into its sheath. In that moment, he could have
attacked him, wrestled him into some sort of position to be revealed. Will was quite good at playing
the victim, all things aside. Acting, when prompted, was a talent with the right incentive.

Despite having the opportunity and the desire, he didn’t.

“It would spoil the fun,” Will decided.

“Too soon,” the Ripper agreed.

“They want to uncover you just as much as I do.”

“Just as much?” he wondered. “Is their own hunger so strong as yours, Mr. Graham? An
insatiable drive that, be damned the consequences, you will have what you seek?” There was a
heavy, dark pause, and Will imagined his curling, wicked smile. “Do they dream of blood the way
that you do?”

“Leave Beverly out of our game,” Will said. “It’s not a request.”

“Or what, Mr. Graham?” came the chilling reply. “If you are to make a threat, you’d better
have a suitable ultimatum.”

Will drew closer, until he was sure they were nearly nose-to-nose, their shared space
shrinking in his ire. He thought of blood, of Mary Mai and the monks whose only sin was being in
the wrong place at the wrong time. He tried very much to feel, in that moment, like the hero facing
the villain, the line between them distinct and firm.

He also thought of the moment when he’d first called to gloat to Freddie rather than call for
help. He thought of blackmailing Todd in marketing and the blank wall that he faced whenever he tried to dredge up memories of what it’d been like to gut a man whose crime was withdrawals and one bad night too many.

It was difficult to see oneself as a hero when they were very much aware of the traits they had that marked them a villain instead.

“I know you,” Will said softly. He had the faintest sensation of his lips brushing against the Ripper’s. “All of this? Is because you don’t want to be seen just yet. That’s fine with me, but if you hurt Beverly, I’ll end the game. All it takes is me dropping a rumor to Jack Crawford, and he’ll be on you so quickly that your entire world crumbles.”

“Are you so certain of my identity?”

He wasn’t, but that wasn’t the point. “You know what they say about glass houses. One shouldn’t throw rocks.”

“And Beverly Katz is so easily found to be your kryptonite?” the Ripper wondered.

“She’s a friend,” Will revealed. “And as you know…I don’t have an overabundance of those.”

“I’m your friend, Mr. Graham,” the Ripper reassured him.

Will’s watched buzzed, but with the Ripper’s hand over his eyes he was unable to see. That close to him, blind only because he was willing to be blind, Will smiled a little, the situation striking him as grossly intimate and morbidly funny.

“What does it say?” he asked.

“A text from your good friend, Beverly, asking your whereabouts.”

“I should go and find her, then.”

“You should,” the Ripper agreed. Despite the situation, he was remarkably agreeable.

“In regards to her, I’m not playing,” said Will, and he let go of the Ripper right as he turned away from him, climbing up the steps of the art hall with a quickness that belied how calmly and easily his heart beat. He knew the Ripper wasn’t going to come after him. He’d left him without looking back, allowing him his shadowy countenance for as long as was needed before he made his way to wherever his next venture was. As he opened one of the many doors leading into the party, he heard a distant door –likely a maintenance door –slam shut as well.

“I’m sorry,” he said on the way back home –not the first time, and certainly not the last.

“You should be,” Beverly said, irritated. “If I’d known you would run off like that at the first hint of socialization, I’d have kept a leash on you.”

“You left me to that…that…” Words escaped Will at the thought of Franklyn, overly kind as he was –overly annoying as he was.

“He was just a fan,” Beverly said crossly. “I have fans.”

“I have avid fans,” he muttered.
“Octavia is an avid fan, and I had to keep low! Where were you, anyway?”

“Smoke break outside.” Among other things. His watch prompted him to drink more water, which he did without hesitation. It was a dehydrating affair to have a run-in with the Ripper of all people on the steps of an art gallery.

“Did you find him? The ‘great’ Dr. Lecter?” she asked.

“…No.”

Yes.

“I asked around a bit, trying to keep it casual. He’s absolutely adored among the general populace there, as he’s a huge donator. Someone said that his galas and dinners are absolutely to die for,” Beverly said, and she glanced away from the road long enough to wink.

Will wondered if the Ripper had ever deigned to share his delicacies with anyone participating in his dinner parties the way that he did with Will—very likely. Morbidly likely.

“Maybe you make enough friends and we get an invite to those?” he suggested. “If we’re in his lair, we just have to find the torture dungeon.”

That got him a snicker, and all was forgiven again. As they drove back to the city, he stared out of the window into the darkness punctuated occasionally by the lights from other cars, and wondered if her forgiveness would be given even faster if she knew just what kind of threat and bargain he’d had to give just to ensure that she was safe.

Probably. Then again, knowing he’d been so close to the Ripper and hadn’t done a damn thing, probably not. One of these days, Beverly was going to run out of forgiveness, same as he was going to run out of bargaining chips

His watch beeped to congratulate him on his steps. Sometimes in cars, the bouncing did that—counted each jerking lull as a step towards the ultimate goal. It wasn’t real, though. He wasn’t taking those steps, same as he wasn’t really the hero trying to catch the bad guy. It was all rather fake, a bit of a ruse because it felt like some sort of accomplishment to look at it that way, head tilted at the right angle.

He’d take it as a small win, anyway.

- 

After work Monday, Will walked rather than take the bus. He’d have liked to have said it was because he was really getting a handle on counting steps and setting goals, but in reality it was because of the ass-chewing he’d gotten from Charlie about lines and the general crossing of them. There was something about boots and asses as well, but quite frankly he’d tuned out somewhere around ‘common-sense enemas’ and ‘heads lounging in asses’. Either way, it made him late for his bus; he refused to pay extra for an Uber when the price sky-rocketed around six or so.

He lipped at an unlit cigarette, something to do with his mouth than bite and chew on chapped lips. He had a rather ugly scab just at the corner of his mouth from that. He made a note on his phone to remind him to stop chewing on his lips and put some Carmex on them, and he idly stuffed his phone into his pocket, ignoring e-mails. E-mails. God, there were so many damn e-mails that he’d turned the notification off on his watch so that his wrist didn’t go numb from the vibrations.

So brave of you to save those monks…
He’s targeting the deaf, now? Are the handicapped not safe in this town because of you?

This just seems like a circle-jerk for internalized misogyny.

He’s attacking indiscriminately. How are you going to keep the people safe, now?

He trudged into the apartment and kicked his shoes off, scowling at the bleakness of it. No meal waited for him at his table – no note, either. Either the Chesapeake Ripper was busy, or he was still reeling from their last encounter.

God, it felt pretty damn good to say that at least he had some control in the last encounter. Some leeway. Some headway. If he made the Ripper nervous, so much the better. Maybe he’d understand that despite the placid and withdrawn demeanor, Will Graham wasn’t entirely someone to fuck with. He’d spent so long crafting that outer shell that now that someone was peeking beneath the layers, he hated just how much he wanted them to be able to see.

He laid back in bed, and he fell asleep sometime later, fully clothed, dreaming of the way in which the Ripper had pressed to him, as though the two could somehow become one.

- 

When Will woke, it was with a disorienting lurch that made him feel distinctly wrong. It wasn’t so much that he had a sixth sense that gave him psychic powers, no matter what Beverly liked to claim about his empathy. Waking, as a general rule, was a relatively simplistic affair for someone like Will Graham, whose watch vibrated with progressively heavier settings until it felt like he’d come to naturally, and just in time for his alarm to do the rest.

This time, he woke with a wheezing cough, spluttering as though he’d been doused awake with cold water. He sat up blearily and looking about with fuzzy eyes, scanning for the red numbers on the nightstand beside him. It took several minutes for his gaze to focus enough for him to really, truly see – he attributed that to the reality what it was like to sleep for too long. That alone settled low and gave him a sense of unease.

11:32 A.M.

“Fuck,” he hissed, and he immediately turned his wrist, a reflex when things weren’t going according to plan. He often charged his watch sporadically, in between meals, in between dinner and bed, often while he showered and prepared for the day. It was a constant companion, even while he slept because then at least he could also track his dreams and see just how restless he truly was when no one else was looking.

His heart dropped with a squelch to the floor as he realized that he wasn’t wearing it.

It was gone.

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to my patrons: Frosty Lee, Heather Feather, Emily Elm, Matilda, Inky-Starlight, Sylarana, Duhaunt6, and Superlurk! You're the best!!

Sorry for the sporadic late posting, but here we are! I didn't kill Beverly! Also, I unnecessarily broke the fourth wall a bit too much in their dialogue, but I couldn't resist.
Not to spoil any aspect of the general thriller vibe I give off, but I've said it a couple of times in the comments for those worried about our poor Beverly: I didn't really care for how she was killed off in the show. It felt (to quote Lecter) a bit ham-handed, and a bit...rushed/forced. I could see her dying at the hands of Lecter, and some of that recklessness where Jack encouraged her to go off alone behind his back, but the house scene...really, truly rubbed me wrong.

So basically...I've got beef with killing her off in my stories. I headcanon that Bev and Will would always be the best of buddies because she just had a way of trying to wriggle around his behaviors, and then he actually reached out to her in the show...gah. The only way she will die in any of my fics would be due to (logical) behaviors that lead to that sort of death -something in character and realistic --Any of you about to toss Where the Wicked Walk at my feet with a sinister glare just have to sit tight and watch the story arc ;)

On another note entirely, I put together a coffee bar in the dining room where I do a lot of my writing/editing, and lemme just say that it's the best thing that has ever happened to a dining room. A Keurig, a coffee pot, a french press, a cold brew maker, various teas/coffees...Oh snap. I even put the k-cups in a display bowl. Is this adulthood?
Chapter 11:

The apartment was soon reduced to a chaotic, shambled mess.

A few cups had chipped and shattered as Will decimated the kitchen, and the trash had been overturned in his haste to hunt through the pantry. Towels laid in desolate piles across the hallway, and dresser drawers had been overturned and upended in his haste.

Will sat huddled in the wake of a flipped mattress and abused Wal-Mart sheets, shaking hands grasping a note written in an elegant, beautiful, and furiously familiar hand.

_Dear Will,_

_I am interested to see just how your world turns when you don’t have an electronic device to dictate every aspect of your life. Will it slow to a stop, marked only by a rising and setting sun, or will you retaliate in a blind fury, unable to stop the quickness of your pulse?_

_I’m eager to see the messages and reminders you have programmed to light up on this screen. The battery life on these, I’m told, are incredible._

_-Chesapeake Ripper_

He could hear his voice in those words. Will reread it enough times that it began to echo in his mind, frantic and furious with the all-knowing arrogance of it. The bastard had even put it in the sock drawer, where a familiar and not entirely welcome knife once lay.

“No,” he murmured, and he felt himself rocking a bit, side-to-side to try and ground himself rather than start screaming. “No, no, no, no…”

He set the note down on a pile of disheveled shirts, and he let out a croaking gasp. He had the urge to scream, to yell. He had the urge to pace, bellow, to rage, and he contained it all within himself as he started tapping his fingers on the ground, the sound hard and punctuated with the beat of his pulse.

His phone rang, and Will snatched it up from among a spilled glass of water and the remnants of a dead plant that’d fallen from the windowsill. He’d have to sweep it up later, along with the rest of his things he’d reduced to shards in his furious haste.

“Hello?” he asked. It was breathy, needing –God, why did he have to sound so hopeful that it was the Ripper, there to gloat then inevitably return his watch?

“Where the hell are you?” Beverly hissed. “You’d better be in a hospital –you’re not in a hospital, are you?”

Fuck.

“I’m…not feeling well, Beverly,” Will said hollowly. “I don’t think I should come in today.”

“Seriously? Haven’t you seen the news?”
“Is that a joke?”

“Dead serious, if you’re not on your way here, you’d better turn the news on. Work is hell right now, hell, and there are cops, feds…shit, other news vans…”

Will managed to drag himself to his feet where he made his way to the living room. The TV had been shoved to the side so violently that it teetered on the end of the stand. He nudged it to safety and sat down in front of it, skimming through channels until he could find the local news. Teeth gnashed against his bottom lip, breaking skin. His wrist felt bare, far too light.

“…and here now we’re standing just in front of Tattler News where you can see beyond the police line the body of a young man that authorities are now recognizing as Harrison Nolan, an up-and-coming member of the Baltimore Symphony. This is reminiscent of the recent murder of another young musician, Billy Nguyen who was found on the stage of the Baltimore Symphony with the neck of a cello placed down the victim’s throat.”

Will’s heart plummeted to a sickening squelch in his guts.

“Although partitions and canvases are being placed to block the view of onlookers, you can still see the victim has been found much the same way as before. Is this a promise of something more to come? Is there another serial killer in the midst of the DC area, looking to upstage the Ripper? Has the Ripper’s correspondence with Tattler News reduced him to something ‘mainstream’?”

“Shit,” Will murmured. In the distance, just beyond the reporter’s shoulder, he could barely make out a man slumped into a simple-backed chair, head tilted back to give way for the neck of a cello that burst from his mouth.

“Do you think it’s the Ripper?” Beverly asked. It took far too long for him to focus on her voice rather than the image before him. It cut back to the woman, and he blinked rapidly, dispelling it from his retinas.

“No, he…”

*He’s playing a different game.*

“This isn’t his style,” he said instead, quietly. “I think this is someone else that wants to be in the column.”

“Charlie’s asking where you are. What the hell do you want me to tell him?”

That took Will far too long to answer as well. The image in front of him cut to the crime scene from before, when the first body had been found on stage. He stared at it for several moments, mouth dry, wondering at the still image of the neck of the cello sprouting from a gaping mouth as though it were coming to full bloom.

“Will?”

He gave a start and looked away from the image. As it cut back to the woman’s white noise of fear-mongering, he shut off the TV and rubbed his face, resolute.

“I’ll be there in a bit…I have to get ready. My alarm didn’t go off.”

“Seriously?” Beverly bit out a snort. “Better have a better excuse than that when you get here. He’s pissed.”
Will hung up and sat on the floor of his apartment for several more minutes before he could pull himself to his feet. The skin on his wrist felt odd, and he itched it as he gathered together a suitable outfit and choked down a cup of coffee.

It wasn’t until halfway to work that he realized he’d forgotten to grab his water bottle. He thought about going back, but traffic was such that it’d be an entirely new ordeal altogether that he wasn’t precisely prepared for. He’d have to rely on work coolers, then.

He almost missed his stop on the bus, and he only realized it was there when the old woman beside him shoved and nudged him far enough away for her to walk out. He gave a start at the realization of where he was at, and he followed after her, an uncomfortable prickle down his neck.

“You’re not following me, are you?” the old woman asked.

He looked away from the distant street corner he would turn at and stared at her for an uncomfortably long amount of time.

“Because if you are, I’ve got mace. I’ll mace yeh,” she informed him.

“I’m going to work.”

She eyed him with extreme prejudice—likely his wrinkled shirt. His hair, too, he supposed, seeing as how he was now just realizing that he’d forgotten to brush it. It was quite the contrast to her own perfectly ironed shirt tucked into pants hiked up high at her hips—remnants of the good old days when gas was only twenty-five cents a gallon and a milkshake was a nickel. He likely looked the type to try and pickpocket someone, in her eyes. A mildly desperate expression, right hand twitching towards his left like he could find his watch there if he just fucking tried hard enough.

Oh, god. His watch. His fucking watch.

“Allright, then. Be quick about it.”

“Allright,” he said, and he took a dramatic step around her before he hurried on his way. He pitied the idiot that decided to try and mug someone like her—that pity faded as he figured they’d likely deserve it if they cased someone like that out and thought she’d be an easy target.

He had to fight through the crowd to get to the front, and more than a few elbows nestled into his gut as he skirted around them all. Their breaths and BO clung to him, and when he reached the front he nearly bowled over an officer that stepped just before him to stop him.

“I work here, this is-”

“ID, please,” the man said.

Will fished out his wallet and handed over his license, eyes scanning for Beverly. A cluster of news vehicles cramped up the public parking, and cameras were wildly swinging across the crowd, then towards the partitions that blocked the view of the body.

“No, your badge for the press,” he said impatiently.

“Yeah,” Will snapped impatiently, “it’s-”

*Right here*, he finished mentally, although the words didn’t come. His hand pressed to the place on his chest where his lanyard would hang, if he had it.
If he’d fucking remembered it from home.

“Behind the line, then,” the officer decided. Will could almost smell his smug superiority as he sauntered away to push back a few people testing the line, and the urge to lunge out at him coiled, ready to spring. It was a sudden wave of emotion, hot and volcanic in its fury, and it surprised him as he stood, puzzled beside a chatty millennial that was glued to her phone.

“Yeah, I can’t get inside to work because of this freak show, and my boss is going to kill me if I…”

Her words faded, though, as he struggled to turn the sudden emotions about in his hands, wrestle them into something manageable. The officer was just doing his job, Will decided. He was just doing his job, and anyone that wanted a closer look at a dead body would say whatever they could if it meant that they could get just close enough to maybe poke it with a stick once or twice. Stephen King had made a novel about something much like that—a group of boys that poked a dead body with a stick.

Serial killers must be Stephen King’s muse, too.

It took far too long for him to turn his feelings into something logical. Half of him longed to rush after the man, grab him, and snap his neck. The other half turned the idea about of him just staying home for the day. He could turn around and just go home, lock himself in his bedroom with a fifth of Jack and call it a fucking day.

“I’d say something, but honestly anything revolving around you is hard to be surprised by anymore.”

Jack Crawford’s voice listed across the foggy aspects of his thoughts, turned about as they were with the feeling of what the officer’s pulse would feel like in his palm as he squeezed. Will blinked once, then rapidly; he clung to the sound of professional weariness, and he looked up from his shoe in order make some sort of paltry eye contact with Jack. He swallowed heavily and wished that he’d remembered a water bottle. It’d sat in the back of his cabinets for so long that it’d collected dust, but now that he’d found it…

Something else to blame the Chesapeake Ripper for, then. His water would taste like the sun-abused shit in Charlie’s office by the time he got home.

“I forgot my press badge,” he said.

“…Come on,” Jack grunted, and he lifted the tape for Will.

As they passed by the officer who was busy answering questions to an irate woman, Will ensured that he made eye contact of a sort with the man. A smug, self-satisfied smile crept across his lips, and it twisted to a sneer as the cop realized just who it was he’d held back from entering. He glanced from Will to Jack, then back to Will; that Will Graham, he was fast realizing. That God damn, Will Graham.

“One of yours said that I should haul you in for questioning on this one,” Jack said as they ascended the steps.

“Todd from Marketing?”

“Yeah, I think name was Todd.”

*Todd has a cocaine problem*, he wanted to say. *How about you go and grab the squealer’s*
It wasn’t the time, though, to throw Todd under the bus. He may need him for more paper analysis or something else mundane and detailed that he didn’t want to do, consumed as he was with his work.

“Todd hates marketing,” he said instead. “And me.”

“I supposed that if you were to start your own killing spree, you wouldn’t put the body on your front doorstep,” Jack assured him. “You seem a little too smart for that.”

There was that. As they skirted the partitions and Will got a full view of the body without the trouble of distance from a news station, he felt something much akin to relief that Jack didn’t find him entirely capable of this.

“…This wouldn’t be my design,” he murmured.

“Thank God for that,” Jack replied.

“This the kind of thing your boss had in mind when he started ‘Will Intentions’?” A guy asked, head popping up from around the body. It wasn’t Jimmy, and that minor change shook him down to his core, made words dry up in his mouth because first the watch, then his water, then his badge, and who in the world was this son-of-a-bitch? Why was everything suddenly changing?

“This isn’t good press,” Jack said.


“Well this guy was pressed for time,” the man said, and he stood up. His mouth was obscured by a cloth mask, although unruly, curly dark hair poked up from a headpiece of the same material. A kind attempt at not contaminating the crime scene. “He’s fresher than the last one. The killer probably didn’t want it stinking up anything.”

“The last one?”

“Found in Baltimore just two weeks ago –Billy Nguyen.” The man eyed Will much the same way that the old woman had, as though he could see Will’s worth beneath his plaid button-up and found him wanting.

“You don’t think they’re from the Chesapeake Ripper, do you?” Will asked Jack.

“It’s on your doorstep,” the man interjected. Will ignored him.

“I didn’t at first, but unless you’ve got more crazies climbing out of the woodwork for you, I think it’s highly likely,” Jack said. “Unless you’ve got another idea?”

Will had several ideas, but none of them sounded stable enough to share. He frowned and glanced back to the body.

“Could I…” he looked to Jack, then back to the body. Could he see? Could he look at this the same way he stared at Mary Mai and see?

Jack stared at him, and Will had an uneasy ripple down his spine at the feeling that maybe, just maybe, Jack could see, too.

“Brian,” Jack said, and something on his face made Will’s stomach flop. “If you’ll step out of
here with me for a minute.”

“Jack,” Brian needled.

“Come on.”

The apparent Brian didn’t enjoy being shifted from his work, and it showed in his face. The incredulous expression twisted, then cracked somewhat as he gave Will the most accusing and understanding expression of disdain that he’d ever witnessed. He skirted the body and Will, then stalked from the tent with the beginnings of his rant starting with, “Jack, seriously, a civilian…?”

Will ignored it, though. His fingers reached for the watch on his wrist that he knew wouldn’t be there, and he sighed.

The body was older than a few days; it didn’t reek so much of decay as it did chemicals. Will circled it, studying the way that the wooden neck of the cello burst from his mouth, lips curled to reveal the artistry beneath. If he’d been wearing gloves, he’d have taken fingers to it, caressed it as he wondered at its purpose –

-No, no, the purpose was obvious, wasn’t it? The musician wanted to play. This was his magnum opus.

The throat was open, peeled back with efficiency, although there was a bit of classic showmanship in the way that it was pinned in place with pearl-tipped pins. The white, bleached strings at his throat turned out to be vocal chords, though in truth Will only recognized it by the thickness of them – normally they weren’t so white, were they? No, no… no. Blood had dripped onto the suit, speckled bits of red like burst holly on freshly fallen snow. The cold, even within the partitions, was biting. It was going to snow, soon. It was going to snow, and the Chesapeake Ripper had his fucking watch.

“You wanted to play him,” Will murmured, and it made so much sense. His throat was dry, and he swallowed, imagining the sort of music that would burst from someone like this, become from someone like this. He took a musician, and he made his very skin, his very bones into an instrument to play for the masses. A true arrogance, to take one so talented and make him your own toy to play at your leisure. He wondered what sort of thoughts pervaded the mind of someone that wondered the notes they could draw forth from the neck of the dead.

Nothing tasty, surely.

Will closed his eyes, and there was a flash of light that turned his lids pink – likely a reporter in the distance trying to get a good photo. He inhaled, and the taste was on his tongue, the scent of whatever had bleached his vocal chords stung his nose, and just in the distance, Will swore that he could hear the sort of music that would make tears come to even the hardiest of men’s eyes.

It would be mellow – something along the D-string, fingers fretting over the vibrato. Will swayed to the sound of it, the crooning lilt that made his bones vibrate, and he imagined the care it must have taken to lay him out so kindly, to share such art with the world –

-Art? Surely, in this man’s eyes, it was art. But for Will, too?

“Will?”

It wasn’t his name that pulled him from the sound, the sensation that sent goosebumps along his arms. It was more the tone, he supposed, and how it didn’t mesh in the least with F-Harmonic notes that settled deep like the ache of overworked muscles. He looked to the entrance of the tent
where Jack was busy observing him, and he supposed that out of any time to be caught not quite ‘all there’ this wasn’t a good one.

“This isn’t an act of anger,” he said, and he cleared his throat to relieve the hoarseness from it. “Not at all.”

“He isn’t punishing the musician?” Jack snorted. “Seems like jealousy to me.”

“No, no, it’s –” Will scowled and rubbed at his mouth, swallowing down a foul word “– elevation, Jack, he’s elevating them. They’re probably good musicians, aren’t they? First chairs, second chairs…he’s taking them, and he’s making them more. He’s making their music something that comes from within, something…”

He clenched at the air, grasping for the words that didn’t want to come easily. Jack stood by the entryway, patiently impatient as he waited.

“He’s… making them more than what they are,” Will finished lamely. “Taking the core of what brings their happiness, and taking that art and passion and ingraining it into their skin. That’s what he’s doing.”

Jack nodded and looked to the man, mulling a few thoughts around his head as he thought. It left Will feeling anxious. His watch didn’t buzz to tell him that he’d better take a walk through the office—is that what he’d be doing right now? He made a move to check the time, then hissed out a curse when he realized once more that it wasn’t fucking there.

“His intestines are missing,” Jack revealed. “Are you sure this isn’t the Chesapeake Ripper, Will?”

“Yeah, Jack, this…this is different. The Chesapeake Ripper isn’t so much a man succumbing to intrusive thoughts –this feels intrusive. Thoughts that pervade the mind until…” He gestured lamely to the corpse. The cello. The art. “And I’d say it’s here because he probably wants his name in the column, too.”

“Are you going to give him that satisfaction?”

“…No. One too many psychos, I think.”

“One too many psychos,” Jack echoed.

He was let go after he sighed a few things, and he headed into the office with an odd, lingering sound just at the edge of his hearing, like the haunting vibrato of a cello’s wavering song.

He tried to banish it, shove it to the far back of his mind where it could lay to rot and wither like his other tasteless thoughts, but there seemed to be a genuine lack of control. His thoughts leapt with short, electric burst, rapid sensations like the quick blinks of his eyelids, watering at the gust of AC that hit him as he walked by the lobby desk: the cop, the watch, the music, the throat, the cello, the need, the violence, the fury, the feel of the Ripper’s blade against his stomach, the putrid muck that fed through his veins like a poison because it’s no wonder you can relate to someone like this, considering your own tasteless, horrendous penchant for violence.

“Will, there you are –come on; are you coming?”

It wasn’t Beverly that yanked him unceremoniously from his thoughts, but Freddie. Just inside the elevator, she swung a checkered arm out to hold the door for him.
“Charlie is having a field day, you know,” she said as he stepped into the elevator. It chimed shut and shuddered before lifting. “Where the hell were you?”

“. . . I lost my watch,” he said. It sounded far more blank than morose, an odd feeling attached to it – confusion and disbelief rather than anger.

“Your watch?”

“It wakes me up in the morning,” he explained. “I don’t know where I left it.”

Freddie eyed him with extreme prejudice. It was reminiscent of the woman on the bus and Brian poised beside the corpse, and it made a trickle of anger slither up his throat and lodge itself just at the back of his mouth. He had to resist the urge to spit it out at her.

“That out there him?” she asked.

“No. Someone else, someone . . .”

Someone that really shouldn’t be my problem right now.

Freddie laughed, sparing him the elongated, pregnant pause. “Wow, Graham, you’re really shook up. Did your grandma buy you that watch or something?”

The elevator dinged onto their floor.

“I never knew my grandma.”

“Okay.” She gave him another sidelong stare. “Just letting you know, Charlie’s—”

“Pissed, I’m late, there’s a dead guy on the steps outside, my watch is gone, and—”

“-waiting for you in the conference room,” Freddie finished. “Someone else is there to see you.”

That stopped him. Will turned towards the conference room rather than Charlie’s office, and he spared Freddie a confused, uncomfortable look.

“That out there him?” she asked.

“No. Someone else, someone…”

Someone that really shouldn’t be my problem right now.

Freddie laughed, sparing him the elongated, pregnant pause. “Wow, Graham, you’re really shook up. Did your grandma buy you that watch or something?”

The elevator dinged onto their floor.

“I never knew my grandma.”

“Okay.” She gave him another sidelong stare. “Just letting you know, Charlie’s—”

“Pissed, I’m late, there’s a dead guy on the steps outside, my watch is gone, and—”

“-waiting for you in the conference room,” Freddie finished. “Someone else is there to see you.”

That stopped him. Will turned towards the conference room rather than Charlie’s office, and he spared Freddie a confused, uncomfortable look.

“Yeah, someone’s in there to see you,” she said, and her mouth of secrets twisted into something akin to a smile. “See, not all bad.”

Not all bad, she said. Could still be somewhat bad, somewhat . . .

Just who in the hell would want to see him?

“I’ll go see to that, then,” he said distractedly, and he headed towards the conference room.

“Thank you,” Freddie prompted pointedly.

“You’re welcome,” Will replied.

He didn’t hesitate by the door because that would be cliché – Will Graham wasn’t much a person for such things as that. Instead, he walked right in with his shoulders hunched, his messenger bag digging into his collarbone, and his tie bunched up, half-hanging out of his coat – this he only realized when he saw a faint, faded reflection of himself in the windowpane across from him. He stared at that image of himself: glasses crooked, clothing rumpled, hands bunched to fists in his pockets. His reflection was more of the person that he generally tried to present at Tattler news;
something innocent to be trusted and left well enough alone. He wondered how his colleagues would have described him, hunched over their keyboards with the pressure of deadlines on their back.

Something much like that reflection, he supposed. Nothing at all like the reality of himself. Nothing at all like what the Chesapeake Ripper was trying so desperately to reveal to the world.

“Will,” Charlie grunted. He stood from his chair at the head of the table, and the look he gave Will could have melted steel beams. “Glad you could make it.”

“…Rough morning,” Will managed after a beat. “Sorry,” he tacked on hastily.

“Well, you’re here. So is your guest.” Charlie gestured off to the side, although the look on his face barely softened. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Whatever lecture Will had been expecting wasn’t to happen, it seemed. Charlie excused himself from the room, nudging and shoving past Will who hadn’t managed to leave the doorway. Fight or flight instinct, he supposed. He needed an exit close.

It took too long for him to see her there, hunched back towards the small AV station where the TV and work videos rested, collecting dust. She was a thin, slight girl with classically straight brunette hair and pale skin found in most rural, mid-American homes. She turned to look at him only after Charlie had left, and although her clothes were plain, they seemed to be a sturdy, expensive make.

“Hello, Mr. Graham,” she said, and despite the watery, uncertain stance, her voice came out strong and sound. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Who are you?”

She smiled. “I didn’t expect you to recognize me, although I recognized you immediately. My name is Abigail Hobbs.”

Chapter End Notes

A special, lovely thanks to my patrons: Emily Elm, Sylarana, Matilda, Frosty Lee, Heather Feather, Inky-Starlight, Duhaunt6, and Superlurk! <3

So...I'm going to just say that maybe, potentially, his watch situation is a bit of a self-insert. I actually have a smartwatch like this (I have a potently annoying form of OCD with time and scheduling) and just the other day, in a mad dash between a doctor visit and work...I left my watch on the charger. Now, I'm not as bad as Will -I don't sleep with it on because I know well enough just how awful my sleep is. But...the whole day was off. The. Whole. Day. I forgot coffee, I forgot water, I lost my sentences halfway through saying them, I kept going to check the time and had to go across the stupid store each time because we do have a few time sensitive things at work, I kept forgetting the smallest things (like why I went to the back room) and you know what...who knows if I actually got my 10,000 steps yesterday? Who knows? Not me. No one stole it, but damn...it really wrecked me.

I'd already had the idea of the Ripper taking it to see just how he'd react in a situation like that because of a few future plot points that will occur, but...then I lived that
situation and lemme just say...no. Never again. I'd glue it to my wrist if that'd help.

Anyway, thank you for reading and enjoying, and just so you know...the watch is firmly on my wrist. Thank God.
Chapter 12:

“...Why don’t you sit down, Abigail,” Will began, and he gestured lamely towards the table. There wasn’t a clock in the room, the only relief to the stiff, awkward silence the rumbling sound of the heater kicking on. It was broken, but Charlie said they’d fix it when he had a damn good reason to fix it. As long as US Weekly kept hitting the top spot, they’d not earn a repairman.

Most people just wore layers to work.

Abigail surveyed him critically as she circled the table and sat down. Despite the slight appearance, wavery and almost water-like in its rippling, it was her eyes that grabbed him. They were cold, ice cubes that’d been long forgotten and left to stick to the sides of the freezer. Will wondered if she was much like him, rumpled and slumped but ultimately rotten from the inside out.

“I got your reply,” she said as Will slumped into the seat across from her. “It was...different.”

“Different?”

“You didn’t sound apologetic.”

He rolled her words around in his head and weighed them, considering her. She looked to be about eighteen or so, just barely out of high school. How honest could he be? How honest should he be? There were laws about what someone could or couldn’t say in front of minors, right?

God, why the fuck had Charlie left him alone with a kid? Why had this sounded like a good idea on his part?

Given the flavor of his thoughts, Will figured he should tread very, very carefully. He was already in the shit hole with Charlie for being late. He didn’t want to risk Freddie and Charlie venturing into the basement level to promote the other Will to ‘Will Intentions’ instead.

“I do regret that it led to the death of your mother,” he said at last, and his voice softened. “I know what it’s like to grow up without parents.”

“I grew up with parents.”

“Then to lose them, I’m sure, is not easy.”

“Are you serious right now?” she asked. Her voice darkened, hit hard and fell onto the table between them, accusing.

“...What?”

At his stupefied expression, she reached into her messenger bag and withdrew a much abused, much reread paper. It’d been folded into a small square that she opened with the familiarity of a person that knew which way to turn it. She cleared her voice, stiffened her spine, and curled her lip. He wondered if she’d taken a plane or a car, whether they let kids her age travel alone on trains. He wondered if she’d read it by lamplight, passing over alcohol-abused words that he’d foolishly
woven together late at night alone in his apartment. God, he should have at least proofread it.

“You said, ‘I wonder what it is that you feel, Abigail, since you shared that you don’t feel much at all. In my own darkest moments, I find myself consumed with either entirely too many emotions to process or not enough to address my problems.

‘In regards to your father, I can honestly say that I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. To say that that simple article has set my own life into a tailspin would be an understatement, but I can only fathom when I’m eating dinner alone in my apartment what it must be like for you to also have to eat alone now. I know institutions such as the one you’re likely contained within, and I know the thoughts likely pervading your mind. ‘What’s going to happen to me?’ you’re probably wondering. ‘Was this somehow my fault?’

‘When you feel nothing, is there a hollowness inside of you that continues reaching ever-onward, grasping, or is it that there is so much in so little a time that you feel as though you’ve simply shut down, your mind refusing to acknowledge its trauma in order to protect you? I wonder about things like that, especially since first receiving your e-mail. I wonder about your future, your hopes, your dreams. I wonder about your father and how even in his most horrific moments, he must have loved you very much to kill every girl he could find that looked like you, simply to cherish you just awhile more.

‘Mostly, though, Abigail, I wonder if you were aware that you were a lure, or if you’re actually the picture of utmost innocence that most of the news and society has decided you to be.’”

When she finished reading, she laid the paper onto the table and stared at him, hard.

Will wasn’t sure how to feel, hearing his words read aloud and in the quiet of a room whose clock was broken—had been for months. Charlie hadn’t replaced it, and he wouldn’t anytime soon. He glanced to his wrist. No watch. No time.

His writing was harsh, though, accusing. His words weren’t apologetic in the least—accusatory, more like. Striking out because he’d been struck, in truth, by words that smarted. Did he care about people? Not for awhile. Did he even stop to consider her when he published that answer in Beverly’s column? No. Hell, he hadn’t even realized it would have taken off the way that it did—if anything, he thought Charlie would have fired him for stepping out of the ‘Wedding Announcements’ cubicle.

“You want to talk about condolences for dead parents, but before you were forced to look me in the eye, that is what you sent me,” she said coldly.

“If it’s any consolation,” he said coarsely, “I was drunk when I wrote that. Even sober, I’m not much of a people person, but drunk…”

“Drunk,” she repeated flatly.

“Yes, drunk. I was working out of my apartment when I came across your letter.”

“You work a lot?” she asked.

“Forty to fifty hours. More now, since that ‘Chats with Bev’ article came out.”

She rolled her bottom lip into her mouth and bit down agitatedly. “You make associations that you can’t explain. I looked up your school records—you’re smart. Top of most of your classes, and a teacher once wrote about you in a psychiatric journal. She said that you could so acutely read a person that it was as though you were speaking about yourself.”
“Thank you, Abigail.”

She blinked rapidly, glancing down to her hands. “You got into my dad’s head better than anyone else did, and all you did was write a small article. I guess I shouldn’t be so surprised that you’re something like him. Smart, a hard worker, and a bit of a drinker.”

The force of his ire didn’t let him consider his words. It unfurled, hot and furious, striking out like a whip. “I’m nothing like your father. He was a cannibalistic serial killer that targeted young, teenage girls and strangled them to death in order to eat them.”

“Oh, and who would you target that would justify it?” she wondered without missing a beat. She looked up from hands clenched to fists in her lap.

_Cannibalistic serial killers, in fact, he thought savagely. And apparently drug addicts that make the mistake of cornering me in allies on dark, drunken nights._

“I’ve never killed someone.”

“You’ve thought about it.”

“Everyone’s thought about killing someone in one way or another,” he replied curtly. His tongue was hot and blistered. “Be it your own hand or the hand of God, everyone’s thought about murder. Even you.”

The heater let out a wild, unattractive scream, and a thin trail of smoke seeped from underneath it. Abigail gave an alarmed jump, and Will glanced to it, then back to her.

“It does that,” he said—not entirely reassuring, but more to avoid her running from the room and causing alarm. He wanted to prolong his termination as long as he could, thanks.

“…You know, this is more of what I had in mind when I first wondered who you were as a person,” Abigail said once the whining cry of the heater died back down to something bearable. “You made me feel like I’d made a mistake coming here with that first introduction, but this seems more like you.”

Fuck, she was right, wasn’t she? Charlie was going to have his ass over this if she made a complaint. After work—if he made it that far, in truth—he was going to get a stiff, strong drink. His thoughts tumbled, trembled like the beating of hummingbird’s wings, too fast for him to catch. The Game, The Body, The Watch, The Girl, The Killer—

_The Game._

“Ask anyone and you’ll find I’m not that popular,” he said uncomfortably. Her stare was stinging nettle underneath his skin.

“They tell you that?”

“No, but I know.”

“In High School, they tell us that that’s just insecurities,” she replied, and maybe it was the way in which she tilted her head, but it made Will stop and look at her, really look as though it was the first time he’d ever seen her. His throat tightened, and he had to force down a lump at the look in her eye, the way she crossed one leg over the other and folded her arms.

Will didn’t often like to think of his childhood. His past was something he liked to keep
crushed down, down, down where not even whiskey could reel it back up to inspect. There was something in the expression on her face, though, that reminded him of one of the most popular girls in high school, Nicole.

Will didn’t much like Nicole for the same reasons that the look on Abigail’s face made him instantly want to put as much distance between her and his person as was humanly possible. It was both dark and innocent, conniving yet kind. It was people like that that led to that one kid in high school killing himself. Nicole had even shown up to the funeral even though she was the one two weeks before that’d told him he should kill himself if living was truly so burdensome. She’d even shed some tears for him, telling those around her that ‘he could have just asked for help’.

“…I know they don’t like me much the same way I know that you were a lure for your father, much the same way I now know that you were completely and unequivocally aware that you were a lure, Abigail,” he said slowly.

She didn’t blink, her stare drilling holes into his skin. Was that where the rot would come out, oozing from him? Could she see all of the ugly, sickening bits of him that most people couldn’t see but surely felt, couldn’t place but somehow knew? The Chesapeake Ripper saw it.

The Chesapeake Ripper liked it.

“I’ll deny it,” she said, and her lip twitched –the remnants of a smirk she knew she shouldn’t show.

“I never said that I was going to accuse you. I’m just saying that I know.”

“Yeah? What else do you think you know about me?”

“I know that despite your claims at secrecy, there’s no way you managed to get here without some form of approval unless you’re an adult. So, either a psychiatrist from the facility gave you permission and is waiting in good graces down the hall from us, or you’re at least eighteen. I know that you were well-aware that you were a lure the same way that I know you have taken on your father’s skills of manipulation with ease. He taught you everything that you know. You can hunt, and you know how to do it without looking like the hunter.

“You’re uncomfortable in your clothes, though, Abigail, and sometimes your hands shake. You know what to do, but the application of it is scary, isn’t it? You’re being called out on all of the things your father taught you to hide. How does that feel?”

“And what makes you think that you’re right?” she shot back. Defensive.

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes roughly, knocking his glasses askew. He wondered what time it was, if their silences and long stares and scowls had drained the hours away or if it’d only been five minutes.

If he’d had his fucking watch…

“You were taught to hunt, and I was taught to fish,” he said into his hands before blinking blearily at her. “You went out with your father to catch your quarry, and I was taught to let the quarry come to me. It makes a person observant.”

“That’s not just being observant.”

“You’re right,” he agreed. “But seeing as how this is a first meeting, that’s about as much as you’ll be able to get out of me.”
“First meeting?” she asked. “Do you think I’d want to contact you again after this?”

Someone shouted down the hall, and a door slammed. Will glanced to the windows whose blinds had been drawn, then back to her. “You didn’t look to the door expectantly when I mentioned a guardian, meaning you’re not waiting on anyone. You’re eighteen, and the psychiatric ward can’t keep you. What’d you use, your personal savings or your inheritance to get a ticket out here?”

Silence. She shifted, uncomfortable, and Will dove for it.

“Tell me.”

Her jaw lifted stubbornly, but as the silence droned on and the heater let out another plaintive squeal, she let out a curt sigh. “I lifted someone’s ticket at the train station.”

He wouldn’t let her have the satisfaction of him showing just how impressed he was at her resourcefulness. Things like that were the reason, he supposed, why kids were a terrible idea for him.

“What’s your next step?” Will wondered. “Homeless shelter? Stealing a credit card for a hotel room? This isn’t ‘Home Alone: Lost in New York.’”

“Women’s battered shelters always look out for young women like me,” she replied.

“Risky. They ask a lot of questions these days since people like you keep taking up bed space from those in need.”

“I’m in need.”

Will snorted. “I doubt that.”

He patted his pockets down, then let out an irritable sigh when he realized that he’d forgotten his cloves, too. Fucking Ripper. Fucking watch. “Any chance you picked up smoking in your post-grievance rebellion?”

And surprisingly, she reached into her backpack and pulled out a small box of Marlboro’s.

“They’re menthol.”

“Everything’s fucking menthol,” he muttered, and he grabbed the box from her. “Smoking’s back for you,” he added, lighting one.

He pointedly tucked the box into his pocket, and Abigail leaned back into her chair to sulk.

“What do you recommend, then, since you think that plan won’t work?” she asked as he lipped at the minty flavor.

“I’d say that you could stay with me, but my apartment isn’t entirely safe.”

This time, she didn’t fight the sneer making her lip curl. “Are you a mean drunk?”

“No, but the Chesapeake Ripper is sending me letters, and the last thing that I need is a serial killer’s daughter being killed by another serial killer,” he returned in far more even tones than he’d expected. “Least of all in my apartment.”

That, and it’s torn to shit, isn’t it?

“I appreciate your concern over me.”
“Don’t get any ideas,” he warned. “I’m getting enough publicity. Word gets out that you’re here, and I won’t have a moment’s peace.”

“Then what’s the plan?” she asked impatiently.

*This isn’t my problem,* he wanted to scream. *You’re a biproduct of a psychopath’s rampage, but just because I reported it doesn’t make it my problem. Why is this my problem?*

Be it the look on her face, though, or maybe it was the look on Jack Crawford’s face should he find out who’d come to visit Will, but he couldn’t very well leave her, could he? Although she wasn’t his problem, hadn’t he first been the one to bring her world crashing down? Hadn’t he been the very reason that she was sitting right in front of him?

*I think that it takes only the barest of nudges to make you fall into the sordid crevices of your mind that you like to pretend don’t exist,* The Chesapeake Ripper had said. Abigail may not be *his* problem, but Will could see how her problems only began because of him. Because of his mind. Because of the way he thought.

He sighed and stubbed out the cigarette in the ash tray that Charlie liked to hide underneath the table—as though no one in the building knew that he smoked.

“Wait here,” he said curtly, and he got up and walked out of the conference room.

“Wait here,” he said curtly, and he got up and walked out of the conference room.

“‘No.’

“Beverly –”

“Are you joking?” she hissed, and the glare she cut his way was ruthless. “Please tell me that you’re joking.”

“She’s got nowhere to go.”

“How’s that my problem?”

It wasn’t. It wasn’t Will’s problem, either. He sat just on the edge of her desk—at least her desk didn’t wobble like his did. Maybe he’d exacerbate the faulty leg on his desk just enough to break it so that Charlie had to buy a new one. Maybe, just maybe, with the extra money that he was reeling in with ‘Will Intentions’, Charlie would be able to afford a new desk for him.

The watch, in all of its glory, would have surely been able to remind him to feel excited about such things like new desks and a popular column. He refused to look to his wrist where its absence needle.

“‘It’s not our problem, but…” But? Will looked down the hall where the conference room was. His spit was rust, and he swallowed raggedly. “I feel…responsible for her. It’s not our problem, but I can’t just…”

Just? He swallowed again, harder, then looked at her plaintively. He thought of clocks and time and how it was both his master and his mercy, and he wondered just how much of Abigail’s time had been consumed with Will Graham and all of his behaviors as of late. She’d even looked into his college years, for fuck’s sake. Surely, in her thoroughness, he could give her something?

“‘Good hell, Graham, if I didn’t know better I’d say that you care about her,” Beverly said,
and her merciful smile encouraged him to smile, too.

“I don’t care about much, but she’s just a kid. If you don’t let her stay with you, then I’m going to have to ask Freddie.”

That did the trick. At the mention of Freddie, Beverly’s smile turned sour, and she looked back to Freddie’s office with an expression verging on hostile.

“She won’t let go of the fact that you let her help you with the last riddle,” she complained. As an afterthought, “If I have to hear about that room for the deaf one more time…”

“She forced herself into the situation, and I was pressed for time,” Will replied quickly. “I asked for your help all of the other times, and it was you that I wanted for the gala.”

The Gala. The Ripper. He thought of how it’d felt, the Ripper’s hand over his eyes, blinding him because he was allowing himself to be blind.

This is the most fun you’ve had in years.

“So now it’s me that you want to babysit an eighteen-year-old whose father ate innocent women?” Beverly clarified.

“Yeah, I thought about my apartment, but…”

He didn’t have to finish that thought. They shared grimaces with one another, and Beverly leaned back in her chair, flipping and turning a pen about. It was a nice make, something with an angled and sharp nib. Likely it’d give a good flourish to notation, the curve of a ‘g’ or ‘y’ looping and graceful. It was probably sharp enough to stab, given the need, too. He wondered if she wrote in passing after work, or if journalism was the only writing that she needed. He wondered if she struggled the same way as he did with adjectives, with the right sort of pace to keep readers just interested enough to want more. He wondered if her purple prose fell flat—surely not, with a pen like that.

“I’ll take her, Graham, but I’m not babysitting her. She’s going to get a job, she’s going to start working towards something, and then we’ll come up with a new plan,” Beverly said at last. “I have a heart, but I’m not a charity case. I don’t want kids yet.”

“I promise that she’s not much of a kid.”

“Charlie’s at a lunch meeting that ran late,” she said, and her smile curled devilishly at the edges. “I told him that you have a heart condition that you don’t like to talk about; that’s why you were late. If you stay out of his way when he gets back, he won’t have your head.”

“Thank you,” he replied sincerely.

“You owe me,” she said, pointedly.

Will figured that he owed her for more than that, though. He owed Beverly for a lot of things, from lying to accidentally giving a good lead to someone like Freddie. He owed her for the late hours, the danger, and the fact that as she’d strolled about the steps of the gala, The Chesapeake Ripper had dared to ask Will how he’d kill her.

I’d much prefer for you to use your bare hands.

He left her with her fountain pen and a desk whose left leg didn’t wobble, and he sat at his
desk for some time, thinking. The time on the computer said 2:56, but it didn’t feel like the early afternoon. He’d missed breakfast. He’d missed lunch. He’d missed water. He’d missed another cup of coffee. Will fished out a packet of stale peanuts and choked them down, staring at the time. His wrist was bare, his thoughts were scattered, and as he chewed morosely he wondered if the Chesapeake Ripper only wanted to ruin his day, or if he had anything else in store since taking his watch.

The thought that followed after, was: *and just what the hell are you going to do about it?*

It wasn’t until 3:29 that he collected himself to begin checking e-mails. Serial killer, serial killer, serial killer. Questions, questions, questions. Accusations, accusations, accusations. Time was bleeding from him, and a headache was setting in. He’d forgotten to get water. That thought, much like others, struck him, then fell away after little force. He still didn’t get up to get water.

Then:

*To: Will Graham & Co.*,

*I hope that you enjoyed the overture. I imagined something along the F-Harmonic scale, although music in all of its intricacies gives room for creative differences.*

-Another Avid Fan

He stared at the e-mail for far longer than he should have. In the chaotic jumble of his thoughts, Will felt the strains of a fading song, something beautiful and haunting. Hadn’t he also thought of the music along the F-Harmonic range as he’d stared at the body? Had Jack Crawford witnessed him seeing so deeply? So intimately?

*Are serial killers your muse?*

He thought about forwarding it to Beverly, another olive branch since the writer had even bothered to include *Co.* Will Graham and Company. It could have been a sitcom, if there was anything remotely funny about people whose throats now occupied the neck of a cello.

There was something personal in the way the person had included *another* to their signature, though, that stayed his fingers from clicking the ‘Fwd.’ icon. Another Avid Fan. Not a fan of Tattler News. Not a fan of Will Graham and Company. The first avid fan was a fan of Will. Another avid fan surely felt the same, too. Did they see him swaying to the song? Did they linger in the crowd, watching him try to break free of the line to go inside? Did they mark him with Jack as he was given entry past the partitions?

He printed a copy for himself, then deleted the original. Will told himself that it was because of Jack that he didn’t tell anyone—he’d promised not to entertain another psychopath in the papers, after all. In truth, as he headed back to the conference room in order to tell Abigail that she didn’t have to sleep at a homeless camp, he figured that out of anyone else in the world, the last person that he should have to lie to was himself.
Now that Where the Wicked Walk is finished, I will be continuing this project! I apologize for the hiatus, but with the job that I have now, my work schedule has more than doubled. My commute -round trip- is 1.5 hours rather than...6 minutes. With the promotion that I got since moving, it also means almost double the work hours. Also, apparently when you get married your free time is basically...gone? So while my first round of stories could be worked on simultaneously, when I was looking back over the chapter updates, I saw a GLARING amount of errors and realized that with the way things are now, I do not have the time to dedicate to editing and writing 3 stories. I am applying to a job much closer that will give me more time for myself, so fingers crossed!

I won't lie, I am so, so happy to pick this one back up! Journalist!Will coupled with Dark!/Grey!Will is SO sassy, SO fun, and here we are. Welcome back, and I hope you enjoy!
Chapter 13:

Beverly and Abigail enjoyed their arrangement just as much as Will supposed they would. They eyed one another speculatively, shook hands, then left Will on the steps of the office building with a turn to their shoulders said that they weren’t going to be friends in the near future. Their common denominator thought to feel a bit guilty at foisting them together, but in truth he didn’t.

The air stung his nose as he headed home. He’d only realized that it was time to leave when Beverly had come up to him and asked if he was going to try and put in OT for being late. Late. He was late on everything, wasn’t he? His head pounded in time with the pressure of his feet on the concrete. Had he eaten? Had he ever gone and gotten water?

His stomach gurgled furiously. Those peanuts hadn’t gone a long way in providing sustenance. No, he hadn’t fucking gotten water.

He only stayed in his apartment long enough to change. The place was still a dilapidated mess from the overturned chairs to the kitchen utensils that littered the floors and counters. He pocketed a few important tools, then saw himself outside once more where he managed to convince a taxi cab to take him to Baltimore.

He wouldn’t begin to imagine just how much he spent just to get a ride to fucking Baltimore.

He didn’t want anyone to know what he was doing, though. Darkness had fallen by the time that he arrived to the posh and non-descript neighborhood, and he waited until the taxicab had driven around a corner before he turned in the opposite direction of the address he’d given in order to head towards the house at the end of the lane.

It was cute, in a Tudor-style sort of way. White fencing trimmed windows, and the rich stonework along the walkway to the front door looked as though someone took great care not to allow grass to grow between the cracks and ruin the aesthetic. It was the kind of home that a psychiatrist would have, Will supposed. Lush evergreen bushes dotted a mildly Asian-inspired garden with Japanese maples whose rich red leaves still clung to the thin branches. Resilient. As he walked just on the edge of what appeared to be motion-sensor lights fixed on the yard, he plucked a leaf idly from one of the branches. He paused by the tree and crushed it in his palm, pressing the leaf to his nose. It was bitter yet sweet, and he wondered if that was much the way that his life seemed to be going –each individual breath holding some taste of one or the other in an equal enough balance to keep him from blowing his brains out. He couldn’t say that his life was bad. He wouldn’t yet call it good, either.

_This is the most fun that you’ve had in years._

He slipped around back and hopped a fence, ducking behind well-trimmed hedges. There was a pond whose waterfall gurgled and spit water down artfully laid rocks, lily pads and natural overhangs hiding what Will figured would be a delicate collection of Koi. No self-respecting psychiatrist would fill a pond like that with anything other than Koi. Goldfish would be the cheaper route, but the Chesapeake Ripper of all people wouldn’t cut corners in his garden décor.
Will found his entry point at one of the only blind spots that he could find – perched on the top of the 6 ft. privacy fence, he managed to hoist himself up using a wall trellis. A few broken vines and a couple of curses took him to the roof where he slipped through the attic window. Most people didn’t lock attic windows.

It was just as neat and tidy inside as the garden was. Even among the dust and aged smell of old things, there was a clear order to the boxes. They were labeled in a neat hand, but although the looping curve of the ‘G’ was familiar, the rest of it was not.

*What if he’s not the one you’re looking for?*

Quite simply, he was fucked. He wasn’t going to even begin to figure how he’d be able to justify his actions to Agent Crawford should he find out what Will had been up to in the middle of the night. The cops would laugh if he accused someone that casually kept a koi pond well-maintained this far into the chilly season. People like that didn’t hide bodies. People like Will Graham, however, broke into homes in the middle of the night on a really, really good hunch.

That, and the guy had his watch.

He forewent lowering the attic stairs in order to drop silently down onto what appeared to be a thick, plush carpet. His steps made no sound; nary a squeak on the wood as he ventured deeper into the house and down a hall that led to a master bedroom just beside a curving staircase.

It was empty; Will wasn’t sure whether or not to feel relief or a mild sense of disappointment at the neatly made bed and the curtains adorning the four-post bed. A quick scan of the end tables didn’t reveal any watch or master plan, although Will pointedly left behind something small, something unmistakable if it was the Chesapeake Ripper. In the walk-in closet, suits of various twills and plaids hung in sleeve order, followed by color order. When he found a small box containing handkerchief squares, he pocketed one, fingers worrying over the embroidery of *H.L.* No watch. No fucking watch.

The house was dark, sharp outlines of vases adorning end tables casting layers of shadows on wine-colored walls. While the outside boasted a modestly expensive garden, the interior of the home felt like old money, the kind of money someone was born into rather than earned. *Natural,* was the word for it. Will descended the stairs, careful to mind weak floorboards. The grandeur of the house was natural.

He wasn’t sure how he would know when it was time to leave – when he discovered his watch? The owner of the home? Evidence? Will perused a sitting room that didn’t seem to have been sat in much, and he passed fingers along a grand piano. The lid was lowered, but he imagined the rich tones of harmonies woven through effortless fingertips gracing the ivory. It wasn’t the sound from the neck of a dead man that Will heard, but something sharper, like pricking an unsuspecting finger on a cruel thorn.

Will tried to imagine the thoughts that nestled among the floorboards and heating vents. He tried to feel the skin of the Chesapeake Ripper as fingertips glided along a bannister; he wondered if he sometimes roamed these halls as Will did, searching but not yet finding. He could see the elegance in the artwork on the wall. He could feel the sophistication in the subtle scent of rosewater and ivy that permeated the air. If the person that owned this house wasn’t the Chesapeake Ripper, they were certainly something much like him.

It wasn’t until he found the kitchen that Will knew what he was truly there for. The pantry held a meat freezer, and within that cooler there were two neat little rows of package-sealed meat.
On each package, there was a sensible tag that labeled a date.

Will’s heart stuttered, then stopped. He wheezed a breath, and with clammy yet eager hands he grabbed three packages of meat with three very specific dates—he barely remembered to take a photo of the rows on his phone before he was rushing from the pantry with his breath in his ears. He had something. He had something.

He fucking had something.

His heart didn’t stop pounding until long after he’d gotten back to his apartment. His breaths couldn’t quite grasp onto an even pace, even as he paced his apartment with three very special packages of meat in his freezer. His phone read the time 3:23 A.M. He still had time.

With careful deliberation, he scrolled through his contacts and hovered over a very specific number, one he hadn’t thought to call in a long, long time. He glanced to the freezer, then back to his phone.

Molly Foster, ex-girlfriend to Will Graham, answered on the seventh ring.

“If you’re drunk, Will, I really don’t have the time,” she said. Time had taken the sting out of her words; in truth, it sounded more like fatigued repetition from a person that knew the words to say without having to miss a beat.

“I’m not drunk.”

“Do you promise?”

Hearing her voice made his stomach turn. “I never lied about drinking. I didn’t feel the need to.”

“I have to ask, you know. It’s three in the morning, and you’re calling me.”

“It’s the perfect crime,” Will agreed. He propped his chin in his hand and resisted the pressing need to tap his foot in order to track seconds. If he’d had his watch, he wouldn’t have felt the need.

“Does Beverly know you’re calling me?”

“I couldn’t sleep, and I thought about you. I just wanted to hear your voice, Molly.”

“I’m not a booty call, Will Graham.”

“I wouldn’t do you the disservice, Molly Foster.”

They were quiet. Will thought about the silk texture of the Ripper’s lapels in his hands. He’d wanted to destroy, then. Something had stopped him, though, stopped him from the moment in which he could have brought the Chesapeake Ripper to his knees at an art gala in Baltimore.

He didn’t like thinking about why he’d hesitated.

That would spoil the fun.

“How have you been?” Molly finally asked. Her voice changed, softened around the consonants rather than spitting them.

“Not too good. I think I over-estimated my ability to be alone.”
“You purposefully isolate yourself,” Molly reminded him.

“I know, I know,” Will replied, and he twisted on the couch in order to lay down. He tracked dust motes dancing from the lights of the traffic below lazily. “I maintain that I’ve never really known how to be around people. I’m learning.”

“Will… I have seen the news, you know. How’s that been working out?”

His gaze darted to the freezer again.

“It’s fine,” he assured her, quietly. “It’s been… fine, really. The news makes it sound worse than it is.”

“I thought about calling you, but then I also remembered that you can be an ass.”

“I can be sociable. How’s this: how have you been, Molly? Are you still working in the bio labs at GWU?”

Her laugh was muffled, but he still heard it. “Yes, I have. I’ve been promoted.”

“Wow, that’s… that’s great,” he said, and he meant it. “I’ve been writing wedding announcements.”

That time, the laugh wasn’t muffled. “What are you doing tomorrow?” A brief pause. “Much, much later today?”

“I can clear my schedule,” Will promised.

“You do that.” She yawned, and it was so endearing that it made him cringe, made him wonder just what the hell it was that he thought he was doing. “I’m going to go back to sleep. Good night, Will.”

“Good night, Molly.”

He set the phone down only after he heard the line disconnect. It’d been awhile since he’d last spoken to Molly Foster. She had a warm heart and a dry wit, and Will had followed along because she didn’t mind his idiosyncrasies and the way he sometimes woke up at night covered in sweat and shaking. She accepted him until he made himself unacceptable. It hadn’t been an amicable break, but there was never the bitterness of harsh words exchanged or tense silences after. Their break-up had been more sorrowful than angering. It’d felt like something had been cut short before it’d had the chance to even begin to grow—a flower plucked too soon.

He didn’t regret it, though. Molly Foster wanted children and a white picket fence one day. Will wasn’t quite sure how things were going to end for him, but he could safely bet that a white picket fence wasn’t on the list of what the Chesapeake Ripper had in store.

And considering how poorly he handled Abigail Hobbs, Will was more than confident that children were about as good of an idea as him being foisted into wedding announcements.

He fell asleep on his couch only after he had it barricaded against his front door, to better prevent the Chesapeake Ripper from dropping in on him. He dreamt of overcooked meat and a fisherman’s hook dangling just out of reach. His wrist was bare and lacking.
His temporary watch was awful. It was a classic analog that he dug out of an overturned drawer from his bedroom end table. Any extra money that he could have used to buy a new watch had been spent on taxi fares – next paycheck, then. He wasn’t sure how to go about removing *that* watch from his data plan while it was still having payments made on it, but the need to have all of his communications blocked from the Chesapeake Ripper’s prying eyes was at the top of his list of things to-do.

He remembered his water bottle, although it wasn’t until halfway to work that he realized he hadn’t filled it with water. He’d forgotten to do laundry. He wondered if Freddie would notice that he still had the small stain on his shirt cuff from spilling coffee in the break room. Breakfast had gone cold by the time he’d remembered to eat it. Cold oatmeal. Cold coffee. Bare wrist.

Jack Crawford met him at the door to the office building with two coffees and a stern jaw. Will wondered if the Chesapeake Ripper had found his calling card yet.

“I was given word that Abigail Hobbs visited here yesterday,” Jack said by way of greeting.

Will accepted the coffee. “She was upstairs when I got there.”

“You didn’t think to call?”

“The last boyfriend I had that kept harping about me calling every time something happened at least had dinner and drinks waiting back at the apartment when I got home.” Will gestured with the coffee cup, then took a long drink of it. It was black with no sugar – the ex-boyfriend had been far more attentive to sugar-coating things in order to placate Will’s frustrations at feeling like a child that had to check in with their mother every ten minutes. At least *that* relationship hadn’t ended because of Will.

“I’m pushy in relationships.”

“I could figure that without you telling me.”

They tracked cars inching by in the early morning traffic, their sour feelings punctuated by the occasional sips they took from the cardboard cups. At least this coffee was hot.

“Abigail Hobbs is being investigated,” Jack finally confessed. His comradery tasted like the small grinds that’d found their way into the coffee. “I think she was helping her dad.”

Will’s most vibrant dreams had been Abigail leading her father back to his apartment so that they could strangle him. His breaths shortened, then stuttered. He took a gulp of hot coffee and regretted it.

“Why do you think that?”

“You have your tricks, and I have a good gut feeling. My gut is rarely wrong.”

“What’s your gut say about me?” Will wondered.

Jack’s mouth puckered, and he wouldn’t look at Will. “I’m still trying to figure that out.”

That was better than Jack saying that he hated Will, that his gut said to take Will and lock him as far underground as possible with no possible key for release. Maybe he wouldn’t feel the same if he knew just where Will Graham was the night before. Will unconsciously reached into his coat pocket in order to stroke over the embroidered initials on the handkerchief. His token. His prize. It
was grounding to feel such an accomplishment. No watch, but if he sneezed then he was taken care of.

He wondered if the Ripper had sent more fan mail yet.

“I met her, and my empathy says that she’s scared as hell,”

“What’d she want to talk about?”

“Mostly she wanted to see the person that incidentally became the reason you had to kill her father,” Will replied pleasantly. “She wasn’t impressed with me.”

An understatement. The look on Jack’s face said far more than words could. Will swallowed down a sneer and glanced to his watch. He was late.

“What do you think of her being an accomplice?”

“What do you think of her being an accomplice?” Will countered. He didn’t want Jack to know what he thought about Abigail’s lure. He wondered if Beverly and Abigail had found some sort of truce while settling into Bev’s apartment.

“I think it’s too much of a coincidence that she managed to find girls that looked remarkably like her every time she went to a college to check it out, became decent enough acquaintances with them that her father was able to stalk them and then murder them within a day or two of her meeting them. The first, maybe, but after eight…?”

He wasn’t wrong. It was suspicious at best, downright bone-chilling at worst. Will chewed on his bottom lip and rolled his words about carefully.

“She’s not got a unique profile, Jack,” he said when he found the right angle. Careful, careful. Speech wasn’t like writing where one had the ease of editing and fine-tuning the words to sound just perfect enough to resonate. “Brown hair, blue eyes, pale and freckled is a consistent appearance in mid-American Caucasians. I’d say more popular than the blonde hair and blue-eyed stereotype.”

“I had her checked out by a psychiatrist back in DC, and they said she has a penchant for manipulation.”

“Yeah, so do you.”

“And you,” Jack agreed.

Will wasn’t sure why he was defending her, but he let out a quiet huff of breath and nodded. “With that logic, then, we should all be on the chopping block. Manipulation is a trait of psychopaths.”

“Where’s she at now, Will?” Jack asked, ignoring Will’s jab.

“Are you taking her in?” At Jack’s pointed glare, he relented. “I had her stay with Beverly. She had nowhere to go, and I figured it’d be inappropriate with me.”

His straight answer mollified Jack, but only just. Will wondered how long it’d be until Jack snapped and tried to wring his neck. “How do you see her?” he asked Will. When Will opened his mouth, he added hastily, “No shit. When you look at her, tell me what you see.”
That was a little trickier to answer. Will stalled by sipping his coffee and pretending to consider Jack’s question, brow furrowed. He glanced to his watch. No notifications. It was a terrible watch. The fact that he hadn’t found the watch at that house had been infuriating, to say the least. His watch would have urged him to finish his coffee. This watch ticked seconds like small strikes against him.

“I think she’s uncertain, and she’s trying to find her footing,” he said at last. “I think those victims weren’t the only ones that her dad kept tight control over. She’s putting on a good show, but that’s a scared kid, Jack. Trauma victims react in sporadic ways. I didn’t shoot dear old dad, but I made a small column that led to his death. She can’t blame the FBI for doing their job, but reporters are great scapegoats. I think she could have known, but then again; I think it’s just as easy to say that she didn’t. There’s no proof to say either way.”

“He tried to kill her when we arrived. Killed his wife, had a knife to her throat when we came in.”

“He was loving up until he couldn’t love anymore. That fucks with a kid’s head, no matter how monstrous their parent is.”

“What were your parents like?” Jack asked. It sounded far more curious than aggressive or accusatory.

“Foster care,” he replied automatically. “Had a lot of parents. Some were great, one ran the next-door neighbor’s cat over and buried it in the backyard. Never told the neighbor. I hated that.”

Jack found that enormously funny. He didn’t guffaw or laugh obnoxiously, but he did allow a very thin-lipped smile to overtake him. He huffed a couple of short breaths and looked down in order to watch his shoe scuff over a few rocks and pebbles.

“I figure that as long as she’s not a runaway, Jack, she could stick around here. Beverly said she’ll only let her stay if she gets a job, so that’s probably what she’s doing right now. Job hunting and trying to put her horrors as far back behind her as possible.”

“The doctor that administered the psychiatric evaluation said that it’s too soon. Repressing isn’t healing.”

“You can’t call it repressing when she sat down across from me and asked if I’d intended for her dad to die right in front of her,” Will said cheerfully. “That’s pretty damn direct.”

“Keep me posted on her is all I’m saying, Will. You can do that, can’t you?”

Will certainly could, although he’d probably be just as particular and careful in what he relayed as he was with the Ripper case. He watched Jack climb into an SUV just at the curb after his coffee was finished, and he headed into work with an odd feeling in his stomach. Probably the coffee. He’d let it grow cold. Fucking watch.

Will was just sitting down outside of the small café that Molly had chosen to meet at when he received a call. In truth, he only realized that he’d gotten a call because the guy just to the side of him let out a loud, unattractive sigh and jabbed his shoulder roughly, once. Will looked away from the thick, fat clouds that threatened snow and blinked at him owlishly.

“You gonna answer that, or you just gonna keep letting that shit ring?” the guy asked, clearly annoyed.
That is when the sound of his ringtone finally broke through the haze of his thoughts, left him equally annoyed as he managed a sheepish “sorry,” and picked up the phone. The man uttered a short curse and went back to reading the newspaper – Tattler News. Will hoped he wasn’t another Avid Fan. He sincerely hoped that he wasn’t recognized.

“Are you ignoring my calls now?” The Chesapeake Ripper wondered. Amusement colored his tone.

His voice filtering through the tinny speaker made Will’s skin heat up. He stood and wandered away from the man nearby that eyed him suspiciously over the top of the paper. He eyed the thick clouds overhead, then looked out across the street where busy passerby hurried home after work. Traffic was thick, heavy with a sense of impatience, and curses hissed from clenched teeth. Horns honked and middle fingers were liberally shared through intersections. Molly was late. Will’s wrist wasn’t bare, but it might as well have been. How many steps had he taken?

“Or is your anger at missing your watch so encompassing that you cannot even find the words to share?” he continued, seemingly unworried over Will’s silence. “If I stood in front of you, would you resort instantaneously to violence?”

“Any violence given would be overdue for you, I think,” he said after a moment. He tried to collect scattered thoughts like dust motes.

“You reflect the world around you. If you give violence, it is because violence was first given to you.”

“And if I steal, you’d say it was only because something was first stolen from me?”

The Chesapeake Ripper was quiet at that. He didn’t sound as though he were among the hustle and bustle of post-work traffic, but then again; the first time around Will had only known because the Ripper wanted him to know. He itched to ask about his calling card, but he refrained. That would spoil the fun.

“That is the way the theory of mirror neurons work, but I’ve come to find that after childhood mirror neurons don’t work the same way for humans as they do our primate cousins. You reflect the world around you because that is how you are able to pass among the general populace.”

“If you tell Jack Crawford that, I’m positive that he’d ensure I was institutionalized,” Will said dryly.

“Giving the illustrious Agent Jack Crawford a ‘bone’ is actually not on the list of things that I’m willing to do,” the Ripper assured him. “You’re safe from me.”

Will laughed, and when the sound didn’t do the feeling justice, he laughed a little harder. It scraped from him, and he thought about Jack asking him to keep tabs on a teenage girl, as though he could be trusted with something like looking after rebellious teens. He took one of her cigarettes out and lit it, taking a drag of the menthol. Seconds ticked with the pulse that pressed just at his temple, threatening a headache. Fucking menthols.

“You’re collecting a following,” the Ripper said when Will’s laughter died down. If he mentioned his stolen items, he’d surely give it away, wouldn’t he? Will’s stomach lurched, curled in on itself at the thought. Was absence of acknowledging it just as damning as mentioning it?

“Sooner or later, every psychopath will climb out of the woodwork just for a chance to be featured in my column,” Will replied. “What would you do then?”
“Come now, Will, you know that I don’t share.”

“Neither do I.”

“And yet you’ve found yourself rekindling an old flame?” the Ripper wondered. His teasing tone was just curt enough when he said ‘rekindling’ that Will grasped onto it immediately. “I see from your watch that she is running late but will be there in approximately five minutes.”

Such casual mention made his tongue curl, made his teeth clench tight as he snarled.

“What else do you see on *my* watch?” Will asked snidely.

“I see your sleep schedule is abysmal at best, and you drink a fair amount of water considering your otherwise terrible diet. In truth, I’ve mostly been intrigued by the reminders that you have set up. They’re quite persistent.”

Will saw Molly pass by the café, her car slowing to turn into the parking lot. He wandered away from the entrance, phone pressed tight to his ear as though he could ingrain some part of the Ripper’s voice into his skin. His breath came short.

“Your alarm starts the day early, and before you’ve even left the house you’ve ensured that at least one cup of coffee and one glass of water has been consumed. You remind yourself to collect your things by the door, and you remind yourself to practice a polite smile in the mirror in your bathroom. You remind yourself which stop to take on the bus, what time you should be at work, and you remind yourself to grab a glass of water before you sit down. After a couple of hours, you’ll have hopefully taken a lap or two around the office while refilling your water, and you have a reminder to tell you when it is appropriate to eat.

“Your entire day is structured from the moment you wake until the moment you sleep, but what I found most fascinating were the reminders that you set in order to appear more human than you really are. ‘Check in with Charlie’ took precedent over ‘make small talk,’ which only went off approximately ten minutes after ‘eat lunch’ prompted you to stop working. You have a reminder for leaving work, as well as a reminder for ensuring that you’ve had another cup of water before you left. You remind yourself to get necessities at the drug store near your apartment. You remind yourself to prepare dinner, followed by a reminder to *eat* the dinner that you’ve prepared.

“One of my favorites, though, would have to be the reminder that you set periodically throughout the day, in between reminders to exercise and prompts to make eye contact. ‘Wake up,’ as if to imply that you exist in a state of dreaming unless otherwise prompted. Do you oftentimes forget what reality looks like, Will?”

“If you’re jealous about Molly, don’t be,” Will rasped, and he was ashamed at how the Ripper’s words tore right through him, left gaping holes where his insides should be. “She was just another dream, once.”

“And now?” the Ripper inquired, saccharine sweet.

“I hope you’re getting your steps in. If you mess up my streak by the time I get my watch back, I won’t be happy about it.”

“A missed day is a red day, yes?” he asked. At Will’s grunt of affirmation, “I’ll endeavor. I’m not sure if your mild form of O.C.D. could handle the indignity of seeing a jarring discoloration on the days of the week that as of late consistently glow green. Congratulations, by the way. You’ve recently increased your step goal.”
Will had a sharp retort for that, but he was surprised by a loud and sharp sneeze that made his throat burn. He withdrew the handkerchief and pressed it to his mouth. It smelled like laundry detergent.

“Bless you.”

“Thank you.” A beat, then, “Thankfully, I found a nice handkerchief for use in polite company.”

“Embroidered, no doubt.”

Molly waved to him, and Will headed towards her, swallowing down something sharp. She was layered in a sensible winter ensemble, complete with plaid scarf and a loosely fitted beanie that made her hair frame her round, pink cheeks. A dream. A dream, and Will stomped down the mild sense of guilt at seeing her smile grow upon taking in his suit and peacoat. “No doubt. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Will. Enjoy your dream, but try to remember when it’s time to wake up.”

Will couldn’t bring himself to admit out loud that he was already awake –had been since Jack Crawford first showed up to inform him that the Minnesota Shrike was dead.

This is the most fun you’ve had in years.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, today is just...wow!

I had an interview for a position that’s literally 1.5 miles from my house! It pays more, better benefits, and after interviewing with these ladies I can safely say that if I don’t get this job, I’ll be so disappointed as they were amazing and so fun to speak with. I’ll know on Friday if I have the job, need a 2nd interview, or if I need to continue searching elsewhere. I feel such eagerness for what’s on the horizon, y’all. I honestly woke up so excited today, and I hope that doesn’t change.

On top of that, please go on Tumblr and check out kenobi-is-king’s lovely artwork on the Ill Intentions chapter update. It was such a thoughtful piece, and it completely encompasses everything about Will Graham in this fic: he was blind because he chose to be blind. --to see would spoil the fun. ;)

--
Chapter 14:

Dear Will,

I’ve followed you since the very beginning! Rather than run from something terrifying, I was pleasantly surprised to see you challenge someone like your ‘Avid Fan’ and put his business out there for the whole city to see. Obviously, the cops haven’t done anything. Obviously, the FBI doesn’t know anything. I saw just how many people have tried to blame you for what’s happened, as though you somehow asked for this. It kind of made me mad, considering that you’ve never once justified any psychopaths’ actions, and from what I can see you’ve tried to work with the FBI in trying to catch this guy. You seem really neat!

I’ve started a twitter hashtag a couple of weeks ago where ALL of your ‘Avid Fans’ have gathered online to discuss your work as well as the work of these serial killers that decided to use your insightful column to justify their actions. If you’d check it out, you’ll find that not all of your avid fans are murderers and creeps. We support you!

Sincerely,

An Avid Fan, but not that Avid Fan

#avidfan #anavidfanbutnotTHATtavidfan

“Wow,” Beverly said slowly. She dragged the vowel out unnecessarily.

“That’s what I said,” Will agreed. He felt oddly embarrassed about it.

“Have you checked it out yet?” Freddie asked. She seemed entirely too interested in it, chin unnervingly close to touching his shoulder. It threatened to dig into him, and her jealousy rippled along her loud floral blazer. “I have. They love you, Graham. These kids are obsessed with you.”

Will had checked it out, too. He’d even seen the ‘Retweet if you love Will Graham’ posts, as well as information regarding his birthday. “There are some fanatics, but a couple of people had decent theories.”

“Anyone with the twitter handle ‘Han-the-Lec’?” Beverly wondered with a grin.

“No, but there’s a lot of names that play off of the column. I think my least favorite was ‘Wills-best-intentions’,,” said Will.

Freddie snickered and drew away from him. Will exhaled in relief. “Why, because we all know how your best of intentions fall short?”

“Maybe.”

“Are you going to answer the e-mail wondering why you haven’t even mentioned the cello murder?” Beverly asked. Seated at a small café just four blocks from the office, she devoured a Danish with acute precision, leg crossed and a dirty chai occupying the space just at her elbow.
“I don’t want to bring attention to it in the paper at all,” Will groused. “Freddie took that option away, but you know he wants in the column. I’m not putting any of his shit in the column.”

“‘A first chair musician is laid out on our doorstep and you honestly thought I’d let that drop?’” Freddie asked. Unlike Beverly, her long empty cup of coffee was the bane of the baristas existence. A customer that bought one thing and lingered for hours after was, in truth, a travesty. Will noticed that she hadn’t even tipped. “Look, Charlie is willing to be understanding since he knows the FBI is on your ass so hard it’s almost a sexual assault case, but there was no way we could ignore that. Do you want to know just how high ratings have climbed since this shit started happening? This is good stuff, Graham.”

“Good stuff,” Will agreed half-heartedly.

“What, you don’t like the pay raise? You don’t like the prestige?” she needled. For Freddie, Will figured that was really what it was all about. Why write but to have people read it? Why write but to entertain, to leave readers just enough on the edge of the seat to beg you for more? Readers that quoted you, recognized your name and told you that your words somehow moved them? Readers that somehow loved you for what you could do?

That, and the corner office next to Charlie’s. Will had been inside of it, and it was much bigger than his cubicle. Most people should want things like that. Will was more than aware he should also want things like that.

“I’m just getting a little tired of doing things just because a psychopath wants me to,” said Will. He still hadn’t told them about the other Avid Fan Will Graham & Co. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to, in truth. Freddie would leap at it, and then they’d be on another chase for another killer. One at a damn time.

His bagel sat untouched, although he was halfway through his seventh cup of water for the day. He’d had to resist the urge to tally his coffee to water ratio. The Ripper would surely laugh to know the thought had occurred to him. His leg jumped erratically under the table.

“No, but you are already back to having a girlfriend tell you what to do,” Beverly retorted savagely.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Dating, Graham?”

“Shut it, Lounds.”

“We’ve got work to do. Are you sure she’s not going to get into the way of that?” Beverly asked. “Two weeks until your appointment. You just killing time or something?”

He opened his mouth, then shut it promptly. In truth, he’d been socializing more than ever, and yet it seemed that the more he opened up, the less he could truly share. Molly wasn’t a distraction, but she was a necessity. She was going to be at his house at eight to watch a movie. He didn’t have a watch to remind him to clean the damn place before she got there, but he’d written it down somewhere. A sticky note? A scrap of receipt paper? Shit.

Just outside, he spied a homeless woman in a wheelchair trying to get to a trash can. One foot was propped up in a cast, the other was bare and dirty as it dragged her to her destination. She worked with single-minded fixation until she reached her goal, and a wrinkled face darkened from the sun crinkled in triumph. With hands now free, she rolled away, the tires on the wheelchair
tracking through the powdering of snow on the sidewalk. It’d hit the news, the dusting of white. Likely it’d be gone by afternoon. Winter was coming, but it wasn’t there yet. Something was building.

“Just because you didn’t like her then doesn’t mean she was a bad person,” he said distractedly to Beverly. He picked at the bagel and tossed a small piece into his mouth. He hoped that the homeless woman could find some shoes. Winter was brutal in DC, moreso without proper footwear. Maybe Abigail would end up the same if she couldn’t handle living with Beverly and working every day at a dead-end job.

“I’m just thinking about last time when –”

“How’s the Hobbs kid?” he interrupted.

Freddie’s lip curled. “I got her a job at a Subway. She’d better not screw it up.”

“She cries in her sleep,” Beverly tacked on. “But awake, she’s quiet. Watches a lot. That’s an eerie kid you picked up.”

“Eerie?”

“Traumatized,” Beverly corrected herself after a moment of thought. “She goes off for hours, and I told her that she has to be back by eleven if she wants back in. Sometimes she makes it, other times she shows up around eight AM with no explanation. It’s like that roommate that I had in college that stole half of my coffee cups one night and disappeared.”

“I looked it up, and her entire property and inheritance was given to the grieving families as penance for the Shrike’s crimes,” said Freddie. “She’s flat broke.”

“She doesn’t have anyone,” Will murmured. He wondered where she’d have gone had he not begged Beverly to take her in.

“Feeling a little sympathetic for her, Graham?” Freddie teased. “Honestly, you keep her around and sooner or later I’m going to have to get an interview out of her when the news gets slow. She’d be a good filler article. ‘The Grief After the Storm’ or something like that.”

“We’ve got a guy that dropped a dead body off for Graham to see, we’ve got the Chesapeake Ripper sending fanmail, and because of that we’ve now gotten more publicity for the paper with #avidfan.” Beverly ticked ‘Will Intentions’ accomplishments off with her fingers. “And now you’re telling me you’re thinking of the off season?”

“That’s the difference between you and me, Katz,” Freddie said sweetly. “Front page material never rests.”

He could feel the ire rippling off of Beverly, thick and hot. It itched on his skin, left a rash where he rubbed it. Before she could reply with something scalding and livid, he stood up and pushed his bagel towards Freddie.

“Finish this off or else that barista will kick you out,” he told her, and he headed out of the door with a casual wave towards Beverly.

Over his dead body Freddie would get an interview out of Abigail. As he headed towards the closest bus stop, he sent a quick text to the number that had messaged him almost a week before in order to tell him ‘I got a job. Sticking around.’
If Freddie Lounds asks for an interview, tell her to fuck off.

He wasn’t sure why the idea of Freddie sequestering her to interrogate her bothered him. It wasn’t his kid that’d run off in the wake of losing her entire inheritance because her father was messed up mentally and ate people for a living. The thought of her sitting there, though, tense and afraid beneath a veneer of manipulative indifference chafed, and when he passed an alleyway that housed the same woman in the wheelchair, he whirled around on his heel and stared at her, hard.

“God bless ya,” she said without prompting.

“What’s your shoe size?” he asked—demanded.

“Any size you want,” she replied.

“What’s the best size?”

“Eight when it’s hot, seven-and-a-half when it’s cold.” She tilted her head at him, dark grey eyes hidden beneath folds of skin weathered and dry. In her lap, a dirty and threadbare blanket rested with her gloved hands clenched on top. “Do you have some change to spare, young man?”

“Wait here.” After a thought, over his shoulder, he added, “please.”

Will bypassed the bus stop and went into the first shoe store he could find. He grabbed the first pair of seven-and-a-half boots whose exterior was actual leather rather than cheap manmade materials, and within twenty minutes he was back in front of her with shaking hands and the breath puffing from his mouth in large, white curls. Abigail hadn’t texted back. He hoped she was just working and didn’t think he was bossing her around.

“Here,” he said, setting them in her lap.

The woman squinted up at him, then down to her lap where she opened the cardboard box with caution. Her hesitation troubled him, although when the thick woolen socks popped out of the box and revealed sturdy, warm boots beneath, her face froze. One heartbeat, then another, and tears welled up in her eyes as she looked up to him with her mouth agape. He wondered if she’d expected a cruel joke.

“I ain’t got shoes,” she said through trembling lips.

“It’s cold outside,” he said, and he knelt down to take the packaging off of the socks. At her shaken approval, he worked one sock over the cast, then the other over her bare foot whose bottom was caked with dirt. “One sock size is for the foot, the bigger size for your cast until it comes off.”

She wept openly as he tied the boot up, lacing snug so that it didn’t slip off as she propelled herself along. His lungs felt too big for his ribs, and he couldn’t look at her as he stood up and brushed snow from his pant legs.

“It’s all I can do,” he said helplessly.

“God bless you,” she said, and she pulled him down in order to hug him, reeking of body odor and a lifetime of troubles that he could never comprehend. “Who raised you? Who raised someone like you?”

“I was adopted,” he replied, and he hugged her back gently, feeling the frailty of her bones beneath her many layers of ragged wear and tear.
“You tell them they did good. You tell them I said thank you.”

“I will,” he promised, and he stood up once more. “There’s a shelter a few blocks down from here, you know.”

“They boot us out in the daytime, but they let us in at night,” she assured him, and she wiped away the tears that collected at her chin and dripped onto her blanket.

“Okay,” he said, and he stuffed his hands into his pockets. His heart was twisting, twisting.

“You’re a good person,” she said, and she wiped her tears. Her smile was wide, the years of her life made apparent in her eyes, how they had looked so ready for cruelty when he’d chosen to be kind.

*I’m really, really not. “It’s the least I could do.”*

“God bless you,” she said again, and he left with those words ringing in his ears, humming and pressing down into his gut the farther he walked.

He missed the bus, so he walked. The Ripper was proud of his step-goal, although Will had to trust that he’d continue the streak. He wouldn’t be able to count them until next payday now, as that money had now gone to the woman loitering in the alley. He wasn’t bitter about it, although her struggle as she’d fought just to throw a cup away rankled at him. He couldn’t wipe her struggle from his skin. He hoped that Abigail wouldn’t do an interview with Freddie.

As he walked, he scrolled through twitter and read the hashtag ‘avidfan’. It hadn’t hit the ‘top trending’ tags, but it had far more of a following than he’d have ever guessed. It jumped from threads of multiple tweets thoroughly analyzing the narcissistic behaviors of a person that would try and manipulate the news for attention to quick quotations regarding some of his particularly sassy replies. The young adults, it seemed, fed off of his every word. A couple of photos of him had been posted, although a few fangirls complained that he wasn’t really on social media.

*’Maybe we can convince him to make a twitter account,’ someone had joked.*

He didn’t make an account, but he did continue reading, even after he’d gotten to his apartment. He loitered outside of it, scrolling, scrolling. He felt their eager interest palpably, a residue that couldn’t wipe clean from his fingers. He had avid fans — some less avid than the Ripper. Some thirstier than the Ripper. None so interesting as the Ripper. It was a buzz in his veins to see such ardent support, an almost cult-like analysis of his words. *Are Serial Killers his muse?* Someone had wondered after quoting the ‘Avid Fan’s’ letters. *If so, he’d better keep at it. This guy’s a damn genius.*

He walked into his apartment and was met with a man sitting in one of his dining room chairs with a cello rammed down his throat.

He didn’t have time to fully comprehend what he was seeing. Before he could even inhale, before he could reach for his phone to call someone — anyone — a hand was clapped over his mouth and a knife was put to his neck. He managed a choked gasp as he was dragged backwards. His shoes scuffed over the landing, and when the assailant was pressed against the wall, he toed the door shut with a *thud*.

Will held still, muscles straining beneath his skin. He thought to maybe see his life flash before his eyes, but there was no time for such trivial things. His life was enough of a shit-show that he didn’t feel the need to relive it. All that he could see was the neck of the cello, how it went down,
down, \textit{down}, and how there was a haunting tone of something along the E minor scale that held him still frozen. \textit{Another Avid Fan. Will Graham & Co.}

“You make the most colorful of acquaintances,” the Chesapeake Ripper said against his ear.

Will Graham would judge himself much, much later for how much relief coursed through his veins at recognizing the cultured, amused voice. At the time, though, all that he could manage was a nod of agreement—stiff, shaky. The knife was taut against his skin. He wondered if it was the same one that’d already made him bleed.

“I read that your Freddie Lounds is referring to him as ‘Maestro,’” he whispered, and Will nodded again. “Do you find him to be a master of his art? Or has his escalation from your place of work to your place of rest left a bad taste in your mouth?”

Will waited until the Ripper’s hand lowered from his mouth before he rasped, “You haven’t written in over a week. Does that mean you haven’t killed in over a week?”

“The two don’t necessarily go hand-in-hand.”

Will swallowed, and his adam’s apple bobbed against the knife. “True.”

“And now my question?”

“He’s persistent,” Will replied. “I’m flattered he’d give me the attention.”

“And yet…?”

“And yet, I don’t really have time for this shit.”

“Because you’re tied up at the moment with another killer?” the Ripper wondered. “Or have you suddenly found your time invested, instead, with the care of a child and a girlfriend?”

Will wouldn’t dignify that with a response. “This is going to make me look guilty.”

“It is, isn’t it?” the Ripper sounded gleeful. “I’ve spent the better part of an hour wondering just what you’re going to do next.”

“I could call Jack,” Will said.

“How many bodies until he decides not to answer?”

Will didn’t have a good answer for that.

“…Leaving is an option,” Will murmured.

“The white van across the street is gone,” the Ripper agreed good-naturedly. “They’re doing surveillance two streets down due to a suspicious disturbance.”

“Go to the park, feed some ducks…”

“You’ll have to return eventually.”

“The closest camera nearby gives me the option of either heading towards the park or my apartment. I could claim that I was at the park and hadn’t returned home yet. They could find it for me when they come to investigate my absence. Fingerprints aren’t time stamps when they’re in your own home.”
“Can you confirm that no one saw you walk into the apartment complex?” the Ripper wondered. “Or did your lack of watch mean that your skills of observation were sorely lacking?”

Just out of the corner of his eye, Will could see the teasing hint of his watch, just underneath a sensible black jacket. His stomach churned. It was sudden, the rush of spit in his mouth that dared him to turn and bite into the Ripper’s skin and pull, tug, rip until flesh came free, until his teeth tasted like iron and pennies. Rather than abate the way it had before, it only seemed to grow, and when his breath came short, the Ripper laughed.

“Poor Will Graham. There is a dead body just in front of you, but at the mention of the indignity that is theft, you are completely diverted. I feel some semblance of pride at that, you know.”

“I know.”

They were quiet, and Will’s breath synced to his. Despite the dead body in front of him, the Ripper’s heartbeat was remarkably calm against his back.

“I’m inclined to do you a favor, Mr. Graham.”

Will scoffed. “What’s your price?”

“A favor doesn’t mean a price. A favor is given freely, as it’s an act of service. Anyone selling it as something different is, above all, rude.”

Will licked his lips as he stared at the body. His heart was calm, like the Ripper’s. He wondered if he lunged, if he could get the knife and wrestle it into just the right angle to cut the band and free his watch face. He could replace a band. He could replace a band and have his watch back, if he was quick enough.

“You may not require something, but kindness is returned with kindness, otherwise it’s rude,” Will replied. The knife didn’t move.

“You’re not wrong,” the Ripper allowed.

“So what do you want?” Will pressed. He swallowed, then gagged on the knife as it dug in.

The Ripper took his time thinking about it, and Will stared at the body. They held the same discoloration as the last body, that same wretched chemical smell heavy in his apartment. Their vocal chords were white. A different sound, though, something mischievous and teasing just at the edge of his hearing, enough that he wanted to strain into it and catch it.

“I want you to kill this interloper,” the Ripper said in the quiet of a cello’s hum. “That would be the favor I asked in return.”

“You want me to murder someone.”

The Ripper’s laugh was muffled into Will’s peacoat. “You’d give the man leaving dead bodies in your apartment the consideration of calling it ‘murder’ versus ‘cleaning up’?”

“I may have drunkenly stabbed someone, but that’s not the same as willfully gutting someone.”

“So you’d gut him,” the Ripper murmured, and it sounded much like revealing a secret – first surprise, then honeyed understanding. “Your preferred method?”
“He gutted this one, too,” Will noted, staring at the concave part of the body’s stomach. It was easier to think of them that way—a body, not a person. A work of art, not a homage to psychopathic tendencies.

In truth, it was too easy to think of them in such a way. A body. An image. A problem—easily solved with a knife, if one was bold enough.

“Do you cling so ardently to your perceived morals when the two of us know you don’t have many?” the Ripper asked. “Is willful murder so appalling?”

Will thought of the homeless woman, how she’d hugged him and told him he was good. He thought of how he’d leapt at the chance to chase after the Ripper, how he’d hidden the ‘Maestro’s’ note rather than share it with Beverly and Freddie. The two ideals didn’t quite make sense, side by side. It was like looking at two completely different people, shoved unceremoniously into the same body and expected to work it out. He licked his lips and wondered how it’d feel, to take the ‘Maestro’ and make him more, make him an opus to his own work and passions.

The E-minor hummed eagerly, a breath of things to come.

“I couldn’t say that I’d do it, if placed in front of him,” Will managed. God, he hated how dry his throat was. “If he tried to make me into art, I wouldn’t allow it. I’d stop him. I don’t willfully seek out people to kill—I’m not you.”

“You’ll think about it, though?”

“We’ll see what you do, first,” Will decided. “I want to see what your favor looks like.”

The Ripper hummed and nodded, his heartbeat still calm. Just at his wrist, the watch vibrated with the same pattern as a reminder. As if sensing his fury, the Ripper laughed.

Before he could think, before he could process, Will twisted into the knife and grabbed the Ripper’s wrist, wrenching hard. The blade cut into him, but he gave no cares as he held his breath and kept twisting, pressing his shoulder into the Ripper’s chest as fingers scrambled in a furious attempt.

A hiss of triumph; the watch came free. Will ducked his head and ran out of the apartment, leaving the door wide open behind him as the Ripper’s laughter followed him down dingy carpets and faded upholstery, mocking yet pleasantly surprised. Blood oozed from his neck, and it stung with something a little deeper than he’d have liked. It left droplets branding him along his peacoat and the collar of his shirt. He didn’t care, though, he didn’t care; he had his fucking watch. He had his watch, and he had the meat and he had the handkerchief.

Your turn.

In his hands, his watch face glowed up at him as it vibrated once more: Eat dinner.

Before dinner, he figured he’d better get ahold of Molly and meet somewhere else for a movie. He didn’t need her showing up in the middle of the Chesapeake Ripper’s favor, after all.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the late posting, guys. My boss was fired for time card fraud, so I am now
stepping in as manager, ergo: more hours, funky hours, and finally a day off after too many days in a row working.

But! I had a lot of fun writing this chapter. Maybe too much sass, but maybe not. I hope you enjoyed :)
Chapter 15:

The next morning, Will Graham crept into his house after remembering to tip his Uber driver. Molly’s bed was only a full, but it fit them both just fine. He didn’t wake up sweating and shouting. The meat with the suspicious dates sat wrapped in a grocery bag in her freezer, a testament to how easily she accepted him back into her life.

A new Samsung charger for his watch wasn’t cheap, but that was alright. He had enough money for a charger, although he’d have to find a new wristband soon. Although he hadn’t had to rip it off, it had just barely managed to remain unscathed, and he could almost feel the Ripper’s skin pressed to the plastic –surely if he wore the same band, he’d become something like the same person? Could the two become one if they tried hard enough?

The white van was parked in the alley just across from him, and Will avoided looking at it as he walked up the stairs and hesitated by the door. His key got stuck in the lock; he jiggled it and wondered if he was walking into a trap, if he’d overestimated his ability to read the Ripper’s intentions as they shared such close proximity and whispered dark things that –

Will Graham paused in his doorway and stared at an immaculately clean apartment.

No body occupied chairs that sat evenly spaced around his shabby dining room table. The decimated remains of a kitchen had been rebuilt, nary a toaster cord out of place. There was a distinct scent of lavender wax burning in a Scentsy that Will Graham most certainly didn’t own, and centered just-so on his table, a letter rested.

Dear Will,

You handle victory and loss much the same; how many challenges are going to be thrown your way before you’re declared the winner, you wonder? Surely there is an end to this chase?

Your readers can hardly stand themselves, can’t they? This is the most exhilarating thing that’s happened to them as much as it’s the most fun you’ve ever been able to enjoy. How would they feel to know you don’t really care about them; what would they say if they could see that it’s the hunt that excites you, not their adoration? Would their twitter tags fade; would their admiration turn to censure? How soon until you become what they most hate as opposed to me?

On wind I sit,

My voice the melody you sing,

Such shiny things I take and keep,

my secrets I hide well.

I am both as tall as trees

or as small as fists,
My grip punctures;
I lay draped in radiant hues.
What am I?

You have 3 days.
-Avid Fan

Will wandered the apartment, letter gripped tightly in hand. A bird, it meant. A bird, and birds ate fish. Was the Ripper the fisherman, here, or was Will? He went to his dresser where every sock had been set with care, and Will wasn’t at all surprised to see that the knife he’d used to gut the man in the alleyway so long ago wasn’t there. He pressed the embroidered letters on the handkerchief to his lips and exhaled slowly against it as he stared.

In its place, Will’s calling card had been left.

I wonder where you keep your secrets, he’d asked the Ripper. Or Hannibal Lecter.

Both; surely both? This confirmed it. Unless the Ripper merely followed him there to observe. Unless this was all just a wild goose chase, and Will was going to find himself behind bars for breaking and entering into an innocent man’s house.

Will crumpled the paper up and tucked it into his pocket. On his wrist, his watch beeped with victory.

“‘You found your watch,’” Abigail observed.

She looked much the same, standing across from Will at the Subway in which she worked. Her visor was cheerful, her nametag sat perfectly straight, and she wore a small choker underneath the collared shirt. There was no scent of cigarettes on her breath or uncertainty in her stance. She could have been a seasoned worker, if Will didn’t know better. Everything smelled like mayonnaise and vinaigrette with a hint of burnt bread. Will inhaled the taste of it and coughed. He hated Subway.

“You could get an almost-authentic pulled pork sandwich just down the road that reminded him of Louisiana seasonings and hot summer days when he was just desperate enough, and it was half of the price.

“How’d you know I lost a watch?”

“Beverly mentioned it.” Abigail accepted his card and slid it through the reader, passing it back with an unnecessarily long receipt. “She said you were a pain in the ass for it.”

Will took the Subway to-go bag and scowled. “They let you cuss here?”

Abigail took a long, exaggerated look around the empty fast-food joint, then cocked her head to the side and smiled toothily. “I can tell you’re happy about it. You keep looking at it every minute or so. Someone dead give it to you?”

“It’s an expensive watch,” he groused. Then, “Did Freddie Lounds talk to you?”

“No, but I got your text.”

Will wasn’t sure why, but her lack of reassurance didn’t do anything to settle the nervous
jumping in his gut. Charlie thought he was doing footwork for Will Intentions. Beverly thought he was taking the day off. Freddie knew damn well he was hiding something, but he'd used Todd from Marketing to fend her off before he made a quick getaway. He'd found himself here before he knew why. Less than three days. He needed to get to work.

“She won’t pay you,” he said lamely.

Abigail didn’t seem bothered by the statement. Instead, her eyes roved over his collared shirt and coat, as though she could see every wrinkle and random thread come loose.

“What happened to your neck?” she asked.

“Cut it shaving.”

She met his gaze, and he stared back unabashedly. “That’s a big cut for shaving,” she said.

“I’m not good at it.”

“No doubt,” she agreed, “since you didn’t seem to get any hair, just a chunk of skin. They’ve got Youtube channels for that, you know.”

“A lesson for next time,” he replied. Ridiculously expensive twelve-inch sub in one hand and a cup of water in the other, he headed towards the exit but stopped with his shoulder into the door, a random thought striking him. “Agent Crawford knows you’re here. He asked about you.”

It was then that her carefully constructed mask slipped, and Will was able to see the edges of the real Abigail beneath. First, it was the fear; that was easily seen, and it hit him like a waft of pungent perfume. Then, there was suspicion; it was something that lurked in the way her mouth tightened and her shoulders turned in.

She wasn’t quite able to return to the perfect veneer of calm from before as she asked, “What’d he want?”

Will shrugged and took a sip of water. Four waters so far into the day. He’d even remembered to mark it on his watch. “Wondered about you. Asked me to get a read on you.”

“What’s the read?” she asked –demanded.

“He’s not taking you in for questioning,” Will assured her. “But if you start cropping up in the spotlight, doing interviews and spouting off about things, he might. You put a target on your back leaving home to come find me here.”

“No one leaves home unless there’s no home to leave behind,” Abigail spat back, “but thanks for the tip.”

She was right, wasn’t she? Freddie said she lost the house to the grieving families, the checking cleared out as a meager restitution for their suffering. He didn’t know how to say it, though; how could he truly convey that he knew, he knew what she’d lost and what she’d done to get to him? That he could feel her defenses and knew why she was sharp and cruel; how else was she to survive with a father like that? There was no home because her father had razed it to the ground around them and left her to sweet up the ashes. Much like Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Will left her with the stench of too much salt in the sauce intermingling with a perpetually running air conditioner, and he marked the first stop on his phone. He had a lot of work to do.

There were seven bird sanctuaries in the general DC area, the Washington, DC Zoo, and too
many pet shops to count. Will visited all of the bird sanctuaries in the first day, the pet stores in the second, and by the third day he found himself touring through the Zoo with an ‘all access’ pass and an overly expensive pizza slice. It wasn’t barren, but he was one of maybe nine that meandered the walkways throughout the zoo, making his way to where the birds sat chirping, fluffing feathers, and being a general nuisance as they fought to be heard over one another. He traced over their beady eyes and gaping maws, and he wondered what he’d have written onto paper to convey their depth of rippling sunset hues, how their voices both clashed yet blended into a loud and raucous melody. His fingers tapped in beat on the side of his trousers. Maybe this would be written into the article, should the need arise for what Freddie referred to as ‘good filler”. Journalist Will Graham Spends an Extensive Amount of Money on Pizza to Catch Bad Guy.

“Will Graham?”

Will tensed without meaning to, and he managed a grimacing smile as he turned to shake hands with who he too-late recognized to be Tobias Budge from the gala. A good friend of another one of his ‘avid fans’. The one with the knowing smile.

“Mr. Budge,” he greeted. A brisk wind passed between them, chilling. The freezing, drizzling rain threatened to turn to ice, but only just. His fingers were stiff.

“I wasn’t aware that a journalist could find inspiration for murder in a Zoo of all places,” Tobias said with a short laugh.

“Writers find inspiration in all things,” Will replied. “What brings you here?”

“As a musician, I too find inspiration in all things,” said Tobias, and he gestured. “After all, wasn’t it Mozart that found the music of the birds as an inspiration to some of his most successful pieces?”

Will’s fingers stopped drumming to the tune the birds sang for him. Something itched, but he didn’t know where to reach to scratch.

“You’re a musician?”

“Well, a violin instructor and shop owner in Baltimore,” Tobias reiterated with a warm laugh. It felt too rich a sound for the modest correction. “I string my own violins.”

“How do you do it?” Will asked. The birds squawked, sharp and reminding; you’re looking for a body, Will. These niceties won’t help you do that.

“Well, it’s far easier to show you than to tell you, so if you come by the shop one day, I’ll show you.”

“I don’t get to Baltimore much.”

“Just for the occasional gala attendance?”

And the occasional, tense exchange between myself and a psychopath. “Yeah.”

“Well, even if it’s not for my shop, you should find the time. Baltimore has a lot to offer tourists.”

Will hummed in agreement and looked down the rows of birds in large, spacious cages, each one more vibrant than the last. Where would there be a body hiding in the zoo?
“I’m sorry, you were looking around, weren’t you?” Tobias asked.

Will’s laugh sounded more like relief. “Yes, I’m here for the birds.”

“The birds,” Tobias mused. “Do you mind if I trail along? This is my last stop before I head home.”

Will minded very much, but he wasn’t sure how to say it. Could he program the watch to remind him to practice tact a little more often? Could someone time that?

“Only if you know a little more information about birds than I do,” he managed, and it was the wrong thing to say. Tobias fell in step beside him and kept pace as Will stared at the birds. There wasn’t a zookeeper in sight, no surly teenage employee handing out fliers with maps to new attractions. He wondered where he could pry Tobias off of him and leave him behind. Whereas before he’d been a mild aid in keeping his friend from bowling Will over—what was his name? Francis? Frank?—now he was the problem, walking too close and smelling of dusty books and cold weather.

“I sadly don’t know much about birds apart from your basics,” Tobias said regretfully. “Crows remember everything, Ravens make good voice impressions, and Magpies take shiny things and hide them.”

“They do what?” Will asked, pausing beside the Magpie exhibit. The bird, huddled in a fluffed mass in the back, paused and considered them, head tilted.

“The Magpies?”

“They take shiny things and hide them,” Will murmured, and he reached into his pocket, fumbling for some spare change. When he found a quarter, he pulled it out and shined it against his coat, eyes on the bird as it hopped about on a branch, watching them. Its feathers ruffled into the cold misting rain.

“I’m not sure if you’re supposed to do that,” Tobias said, but it was a lost statement, something far away and echoing too faintly to catch.

Will stood just on the ledge of the cage and held his hand out, offering the quarter. No zookeeper nearby. No zookeeper, but there was a melody of birds and a magpie.

*My voice the melody you sing, Such shiny things I take and keep, my secrets I hide well.*

“Mr. Graham—”

“Investigative journalism, Mr. Budge,” Will murmured, and when the magpie flew over to him, his heart stuttered. Its claws clung to the chicken wire that kept it captive, and as its beak clacked, wanting, Will smiled.

“Hello, Mr. Graham,” the bird greeted kindly, in the garbled sort of voice that all birds have. Throaty. Mocking.

Will was over the small guard rail and rushing between the cages before he had enough time to consider his actions, before he could truly recall Mr. Budge’s feeble attempt at warning him.

The door to the employee walkway was unlocked and mildly ajar; Will stepped into the humid and enclosed space with the same trepidation that he would stepping into a lion’s den. The birds still sang, and he palmed the quarter indecisively, looking about. Where the front of the
enclosures were bright and engaging to meet the needs of their inhabitants, the back of the enclosures were grey and cement-walled. He dragged a palm along the damp grey, and once he reached the entrance to the magpie’s enclosure, he grasped the handle, unsurprised to feel it turn with ease.

Just inside was much of the same grey walls, although they’d thought to add perches, hiding holes, and a few plants for the magpie to tuck himself into. The opening that gave the birds freedom to move between the social part of their enclosure and the private part was open rather than shut; normally they were closed during open hours to ensure that the birds couldn’t hide from the public.

Will opened it, his pulse pushing through his neck with a burning sensation in his veins.

The magpie knew; he was inside of the back of the enclosure within just a few seconds, his knowing stare so much worse off because how was it that of all the things to see, all the people to see, he knew exactly which one was Will Graham?

“Where are they?” he asked breathlessly.

“Hello, Mr. Graham.”

“Where?” he demanded, a little more firmly.

The magpie tilted his head, and he clacked his beak.

In response, Will lifted the quarter, and he scowled back.

“Please?” the bird asked.

“Please,” Will agreed.

The magpie flew to the small supply closet, and it took only a few curses and a conveniently nearby hammer before Will was breaking the lock off of it just in time to catch the dead body that dropped from the roof of the enclosure in order to land on top of him.

“Hello, Mr. Graham!” the Magpie shrieked.

He was waiting with Tobias Budge at the back of an ambulance.

Will wouldn’t say that he enjoyed waiting with Tobias Budge at the back of the ambulance, but since he’d hit his head on the concrete and blacked out for seven seconds, the medic wasn’t letting him leave anytime soon. Jack Crawford will want to know you’re okay, he’d said. He has all information from the local police routed over to them. He’ll know you’ve been hurt.

His watch beeped; it’d been almost an hour since he’d last taken a step.

The Magpie in the enclosure wasn’t the Magpie that the Zoo had ‘borrowed’ from the Atlanta Zoo for a series in birds. Will had already texted to inform Beverly and Freddie of the drama that was sure to unfold at the Atlanta Zoo demanding their bird back, but he was mostly concerned about what would happen to the Magpie that’d been left behind, the one trained to say his name.

“He will probably be taken to the FBI,” the first officer on the scene had said.

“Evidence and all if the Chesapeake Ripper owned him,” her partner had added.

Evidence and all. Will had come to just in time for Tobias to almost drop him with a startled
shout as he tried to free him from the grotesque corpse whose stench had left a couple of cops gagging up their lunch.

“Is this common for journalists, or is this just our lucky day?” Tobias asked. Blood was streaked along the starched white collar underneath his shock blanket, and there was still some on his neck. Rancid blood from the veins of a dead man. Will wanted to bathe until he scrubbed his skin off.

“‘Comes with the territory,’” he said.

“Sounds like a stressful job,” said Tobias. He huddled further into his shock blanket, and the flash of red disappeared. “Was it like that before you started this column?”

“Mostly it was forcing myself to eat a lot of fondant and pretend to be excited about interviewing Great Uncles from the war,” Will replied. “I can’t say which one I prefer more.”

Tobias’ smile was pleasant. “First the Chesapeake Ripper, then the Maestro—you’ve got your hands full.”

“I’m not worried about the Maestro,” Will replied automatically, but he instantly regretted it. Tobias’ laugh was too loud against his ear, and he leaned away from it instinctively.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard someone say that about a serial killer,” he said.

Will shrugged and looked down to his feet that hung off of the ambulance. His left foot swung in time with the flashing blue lights on the cop car. “I guess he just doesn’t have the same… tone.”

“How so?”

That was the problem, though, wasn’t it? Will dreamt of the stiffened bodies the Maestro had left behind, yet standing before them he could only focus on the Ripper and how close he pressed his mouth to Will’s ear, whispering wicked things. His watch vibrated again, and he dismissed the shoe notification whose laces trailed into a lazy ‘Zzz…’ He’d have to work harder on his step goal tomorrow.

“He wants me to want it the way he does,” Will said at last, when he could find the words. “It’s off, it’s… showy. Not clever. I’m a journalist, not a psychopath with an obsession with music or complex anatomical modifications.”

“Yet here you are, breaking into Zoo enclosures,” Tobias said with a laugh.

“Here I am,” Will agreed glumly.

“How do you know that he wants you to want it the way that he does? How do you know it’s a he?” At Will’s perplexed expression, he continued, “I’m sorry, am I asking too much? I could always wait for your column to come out.”

“He won’t be in the column.” Will looked back to his swinging shoe. The silence after left him wanting. “It’s showy, isn’t it?”

“Him putting it on your doorstep, you mean.”

“Yeah, that.” Doorsteps. First work, then home. He’d be hiding them underneath Will’s normal seat on the bus if he wasn’t careful. “He very obviously wants to be in the column, and I’m
not one for entertaining things like that.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper gets that sort of entertainment though.”

Will hummed non-committedly. How could he, with all of his vast limitations in speech, even begin to explain how very wrong that sort of estimation was? That the Ripper gave zero fucks about the column, how that was just the conduit in which they first communicated, how it was through that and that alone that Will first began to wake up?

*This is the most fun you’ve had in years.*

“Do you think he’s going to escalate his crimes if you don’t give him the attention he’s seeking?” Tobias pressed.

“It’s not my fault if he does.”

“Isn’t it? If he’s only doing it because you’re not giving him what he wants, I’d personally wonder about repercussions.”

“Will Graham.”

Over the years, Will had grown accustomed to the many ways in which he was addressed. More often than not, there was a level of exasperation to it—mostly from teachers or authority figures. Sometimes, there would be laughter in their voice at something particularly funny he’d shared, sometimes nonchalance. Most times, something pressing and prodding managed to snake its way into their voice, something that let him know that he was probably a little too far detached from reality at the moment.

Despite the aggravated weariness, Will could honestly say that he was more than happy to be rescued by Agent Jack Crawford.

“Agent Crawford,” he greeted, and his foot stilled the swinging motion. The lights on the cop car kept flashing, and he felt disjointed from it, out of time. He glanced to his watch. The seconds kept ticking.

“Walk with me, Mr. Graham,” Jack prompted.

Will hopped off of the back of the ambulance and shot Tobias Budge a look that he hoped conveyed some sort of regret at their conversation being interrupted.

“Mr. Budge.”

“Mr. Graham. Best of luck to you. Your life seems very exciting.”

They shook hands, and Will found himself casually rubbing his palm into his work slacks as he turned his back and walked away.

“You look relieved to see me,” Jack said suspiciously.

“Out of everything going on, Jack, I can safely say that you’re the most constant in my life,” Will replied cheerfully. “You were saving me from an apparent fan.”

“An Avid Fan?”

They considered one another as they paused just on the other side of the police line. The mist was becoming rain at a slow and agonizing pace. It clung to Will’s cheeks and left his nose pink.
“An avid fan, but not *that* avid fan,” Will said slowly.

“You sure about that?”

“You could investigate him if you want. I did think it was weird to run into him here.” Will glanced back to where Tobias was giving another agent his testimony. “He lives in Baltimore and owns an instrument shop.”

“Well unless he’s making violins out of bodies, he’s not my problem.” Jack’s brow deepened into a divot, and he glared impressively at Will. “You are.”

“I found the body,” he protested.

“What’d I say about leaving me out of the loop, Graham?” Jack asked in a low growl. “Didn’t I say I’d have you brought in for obstruction of justice?”

This wasn’t happening. Will looked across the police line to the agents milling about with intent, their probing gazes not once turned his way. This was supposed to happen, his standing here with Jack. The agents knew not to wander by and interrupt.

“You’ll never catch him that way,” Will warned. His stomach was doing something funny in his gut, wrenching tight, tight, tight. He coughed to dispel the pressure. “He’ll just bide his time or disappear altogether. You won’t draw him out that way.”

“No, apparently all I need to do that is walk a very thin line between abiding by the law and getting in the way of the law,” Jack snarled. “If I’d known that years ago, I’d have caught him by now.”

Will thought of his meeting in less than two weeks’ time, how close he was to seeing Dr. Lecter in person and ending this once and for all. He thought of Abigail, how she was listless and had nowhere to turn, no one to lean on now that she was so utterly, utterly alone. He thought of the column, of Freddie looking at him across the coffee shop table with the oddest expression in her eyes, like she could finally see him and both loved and hated what she saw.

He thought of Beverly and how mad she was going to be after this.

“You arrest me, and you’ll never find him,” said Will, voice lowering to a soft murmur. He tried to make it coaxing, gentle. “He’d think it was funny you were so busy coming after me in a blind rage that you missed him entirely. He’d laugh all the way to the bank, Agent Crawford. Neither one of us want that.”

Jack Crawford managed a very small, sly smile. “I’m willing to take that bet. Will Graham, you’re under arrest for obstruction of justice and impeding an investigation. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do can and will be used against you…”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you’re all having a good day! The job search continues, but I’m staying optimistic! I’m posting this while on break because I don’t know when I’ll be getting home tonight, so if there are any glaring grammatical issues please don’t hold it against me :)

I will admit that there was a bit of a self-insert moment there with the magpie. When I
was at the Houston Zoo, something about my appearance drew a magpie over to me from his enclosure. I have a video on my phone of the little guy singing to me, preening for me, and generally showing off. When I didn't give him whatever it was he was apparently searching for, he left; not before a five minute song that made my day, though! I now have a soft spot for the little buggers. Apparently in Australia they dive-bomb people? Who knew.

Anyway, a bit of a long note, but I just wanted to say thanks to all of you that have supported my work! This is one of those hobbies that I do hope to have as a career one day, and to see so many of you enjoy this -whether newcomers to my writing or people that have been here since the beginning- honestly gives me hope for the future. Y’all are all great! <3
Chapter 16:

Will Graham stared at the two-way mirror in front of him, and he tried to ignore the headache that sat just behind his left eye. Time moved differently when one was being questioned. He had to keep looking at his watch to ensure that time was moving at an even pace.

“Having trouble keeping eye contact, Mr. Graham?”

“There’s nothing new there to see, Jack.”

Jack didn’t like the familiarity of his Christian name being used. His mouth puckered, and he looked ready to spit venom.

Will looked back to Jack’s earlobe. “Don’t I get a phone call?”

Jack considered him for a long moment, then nodded. “At the end.”

The room was a normal 8x8 with boring cement walls and a boring aluminum chairs. His watch was only at forty percent. He’d been there for a couple of hours.

“I told you everything I know,” Will protested. “I don’t know what else you want from me.”

“See, at first I was pretty willing to believe that,” Jack agreed, only he didn’t sound so agreeable. “A reporter sniffs out a crazy, things happen. He’s willing to cooperate, I’m willing to cooperate. I think that I’m an agreeable man when things make sense.”

Will agreed with no such sentiment, considering everything that’d happened since their first meeting.

“But when it gets back to me that you’re trying to dig into medical records, I get a little nervous. When you’re still going places without telling anyone, attending galas without telling anyone –”

“–As though a reporter can’t just go to a God damn gala, honestly –”

“And your little friend Freddie Lounds accidentally lets it slip that you two are working together –”

The look Jack Crawford gave him was somehow both stern yet betrayed. Their hatred of Freddie Lounds, the very tie that created their small alliance, had unraveled. Somewhere, Will had overplayed his hand there. Freddie’s mouth was too big.

“You can’t arrest me for playing nice at work,” Will whispered. “You have your job to worry about, and I have mine.”

Jack wasn’t wearing his wedding ring. Somewhere along the way, with Abigail, homeless men, the Ripper, and now this, Will had missed it. He could see the change in skin tone, the lighter strip where the ring had rested for so long, vulnerable and bare. He wondered if Jack worried over the spot often, so long he’d had something there to touch. He wondered if he was a widow, or if his
own obsession with the Ripper had taken precedent over other people.

    In truth, Will could relate to that.

    “You’re aware that you’ve been arrested for obstruction of justice and impeding an investigation. After speaking with the DA, we’re willing to cut a deal and let these charges go, should you comply and cooperate with our investigation in catching the Chesapeake Ripper.”

    “I have been cooperating.”

Jack snatched a file up from the table and opened it, slapping papers down with definitive, sharp thwack’s.

    “Then why is it that the Chesapeake Ripper is leaving you a dead body that the Maestro first tried to send?” he snarled. “What game are you playing here, Mr. Graham?”

Will stared at the photos of the body that’d dropped on him. It was not the pallor or rigor mortis of the corpse that disgusted him, but rather the throat that’d been peeled back to expose vocal cords that Will had only seen once before—it was rather difficult to forget what bleached vocal cords looked like, after all.

It was the body from his apartment. The Chesapeake Ripper’s favor.

    “…I’m not playing any games, Agent Crawford,” he said, and he tried to make his voice shake ever-so-slightly. “But that doesn’t mean that you’re not getting played.”

Jack’s sigh was aged, rancid. He slapped the file closed, and he stood. “I’m having a psychiatrist do an evaluation on you. Depending on what he has to say about this matter, depends on whether or not I’m inclined to agree with you.”

    “Do I have any say in this?”

The door was closing just behind him as Jack replied, “No.”

It took awhile for the psychiatrist to show. Seconds ticked, minutes passed, and Will stared at the photos of the dead body. Time had not done the victim well; the contortion of his limbs seemed painful, even in passing, and there were lacerations at his mouth. Likely from where the Ripper had pulled the neck of the cello out. Will wondered where the Ripper was now, if he was laughing at his joke. He wondered just what notes the Maestro had intended to play for him. Will Graham & Co.

The door opened.

His watch beeped with a reminder: wake up.

    “Good afternoon. Will Graham, was it?”

Will watched the Chesapeake Ripper stride across the room and sit down across from him.

Rather, he watched the man from the gala stride across the room, face remarkably placid despite once having dared to cry in public at the voice of an angel.

He heard the Chesapeake Ripper, and that’s all that mattered.

Face to face, at last. Will’s heart skipped a beat, then began to pound violently.

    “…Yes, that’s right.”
“I’m Dr. Lecter, and I’ll be doing your psychiatric evaluation. Is that alright?”

Will leaned back into his chair and folded his arms tight across his chest. His heels dug into the cement floor. “I think that you and I both know that I don’t have a choice in that.”

“You know, I’ve a remarkable associate that I could ask a favor of, if you’re uncomfortable. We always have a choice, in some way or another.”

“Do you really believe that?” Will asked with a snort.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter’s smile was all teeth. “Don’t you?”

He was dressed rather eclectically, tweed with a matching taupe tie. Silvering ashen hair was combed neatly with a professional part, and Will could imagine the two of them across from one another in utter darkness, eating a bird whose song charmed God. This guy looked the part to find a person willing to sell him Ortolan under the table. He was handsome, in an intense sort of way. There was something purposeful, rigid in his face, as though he were two seconds away from being severe. The straight, firm line of his mouth only added to it, coupled with incisors that looked lethal enough to tear flesh.

“Sometimes we have a choice. Other times, emotion removes the ability to truly choose, blinded as we can be,” Will said.

Dr. Lecter tilted his head slightly. “Do you often feel as though you are not in control?” he wondered. Will thought of his voice pressed close, the dead body placed neatly on his dining room chair. His voice was the same.

*His voice was the fucking same.*

“I keep myself more scheduled than most, I’d say. I remain in pretty good control.”

Hannibal glanced down to the photos of the dead body in front of them, then looked back up to Will with an amiably sympathetic expression. “Do you truly think so?”

Will laughed, and he looked over Hannibal’s shoulder to the mirror, his ashen face staring back at him. His head ached. He thought about the magpie and wondered if it’d be alright. He wondered if he’d gotten the quarter in the end, or if they’d confiscated it.

“They’re not recording this. Doctor, patient confidentiality,” Dr. Lecter assured him.

“Thank you.”

“In two weeks’ time you are, coincidentally enough, going to be my patient. I thought it morally necessary to maintain that same professionalism now.”

“You recognized my name?”

“When Agent Crawford made the call, I couldn’t refuse. I do try to keep in mind all of my new patients, and I thought it better for you and myself than to be questioned by anyone else,” said Dr. Lecter. This time, his smile was small, a secret thing for the two of them. Will wanted to hold it close and hoped that Jack wasn’t watching.

“Do you enjoy games, Dr. Lecter?” Will asked.

“I’d say that I enjoy them as much as any other man.”
“But no more. Only enough to appear utterly normal in every way, shape, and form.”

“Do you feel that you do the same, Will? Do you wear a person suit?”

“If so, it’s a bad one, don’t you think? I stand out like a sore thumb.”

The good doctor laughed, fine lines crinkling at the corners of his eyes. They were the color of a faded barn door, lines of brown cutting through the rich color. He wondered what they looked like in the sunlight.

“I believe your suit depends on who is around you. You don their persona as you see fit. Some people you fear to see, to take upon yourself, but others you take to as a fish to water.”

“Who do you think I’d fear to see?”

“Your Avid Fan is someone that first comes to mind. With such a mind as theirs, surely perception would be a tool that is pointed both ways. They may see the world as a stage for their most vivid dreams and horrors to play out, but you’re also the one able to stand beside them and see it, too.”

Will licked dry lips and tilted his head, mirroring the man just across from him.

“Understanding doesn’t mean guilt.”

“Your taking in Miss Hobbs after she came all this way to find you would tell me otherwise, Mr. Graham,” the Chesapeake Ripper said kindly. “How is she doing?”

Will thought of the Subway she worked at, and he wondered if he should have just bought a bag of chips rather than pay so much for such a terrible sandwich. Maybe he’d have felt a little bit better about this whole arrest and current situation.

Granted, sitting down across from the Chesapeake Ripper hadn’t been on his list of things to do today, but so far it was going well.

The game was getting really, really interesting.

“...I may feel some responsibility,” he said after a moment. “Although it’s not my fault that the FBI decided to kick down her door. I know that.”

“Do you often wonder, though, how different it would have gone had you been there instead?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you think you’d have been able to save her father, that she didn’t have to watch both her greatest nightmare and her greatest protector fall?”

In the light, the Ripper had a way of cupping his cheek as he spoke, his gaze so fixed that there was no question his intention was solely on Will. That sort of seeing, that sort of fixation, was enough that Will’s normally swinging foot stilled, pressed hard to the cement where the cement pushed back. It was grounding, his stare. He thought of the drug addict he’d stabbed and wondered if the doctor had been giving him much the same look in the dark alley.

He wanted to ask; he figured he’d better not.

“I think there was no way that Garrett Jacob Hobbs was leaving that house alive,” he replied
after a time. “I think that he’d have found a way to die no matter who was there. His world was ending. Her world was ending. There was no case to plead. Likely he knew what happens to guys like that that go to prison. Death was mercy, and he was selfish until the last second.”

“How do you feel about death? Do you also see it as a sort of mercy?”

He thought of the Ripper saving that man, only out of some sort of responsibility to the body shutting down rather than the person inside of it. Action and reaction. He’d let both Will and the would-be mugger live.

*I was curious.*

“Death…is personal to everyone, I think. My mom always said you couldn’t tell someone how to grieve because they were the one dealing with death. The one that died has the easy job of dying, but it’s those they leave behind that have to face death fully and try to understand.” Will shrugged and bit at a hangnail on his thumb. “I think sometimes its mercy, and sometimes its unjust. Mostly, though, it simply is. We as humans imbue it with meaning, but death itself is neither good nor evil. It is the simple balance of nature.”

“Were you close with your mother?”

“Aren’t all young men?” Will returned, equally as calm.

“I was unable to, as my mother passed when I was very young.” Dr. Lecter adjusted his notepad and scratched a few things down. “I imagine that we would have been.”

“What is death to you, Dr. Lecter? Do you imbue it with meaning?”

“If we are the ones to give death its importance, then yes. Death is an elevation. In the bible, they speak of people rising up as angels, as guardians and heralds to god.”

“Almost like a reward. When one suffers, it is with the hope that there is a payoff for their suffering.”

“What is your payoff in this, then?” Dr. Lecter asked. “After the Ripper is caught, after the FBI finally leaves you to your paper and your work, what is the payoff for all of this suffering?”

The way he said suffering didn’t make it sound so awful. It sounded tempting, something that rolled off of the tongue and left you wanting. Will watched his lips, then looked back to his eyes. Why did he have to be so god damn interesting?

“I was thinking of a vacation, actually. I’ve been compounding vacation since I first started there, so…something far away. Something relaxing.”

“Something where you can forget your close encounters with the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“No matter where I go, that’s not something I can forget, Dr. Lecter.”

That small smile returned, fleeting and all-knowing. “Not with the way your mind works, at least.”

“Not with the way that my mind works,” Will agreed.

“Do you think that you could go back to writing after this? Given how eloquent your writing has been since everything began.”
Are serial killers your muse?

“Have you read my works, doctor?” Will asked with mock surprise.

“I’ve been following them off and on, yes. You’re a hit in Baltimore, too, given your attendance at the gala. It seems that everywhere you go, you leave something memorable behind. You’ve even a little bit of a following, so I’ve heard.”

“And yet there I was, sitting at my office space wondering if I’d die writing about baby’s breath.”

That small smile flashed once more, and something about it made a jolting sensation strike at his chest, centered and distinctly pleasant. He resisted the urge to rub at the spot, smooth the feeling away with soft pressure.

Dr. Lecter excused himself shortly after, and Will was left to sit once more, mind spinning. Without the doctor sitting across from him, staring, he was left to turn their words over, blood racing. The Chesapeake Ripper left him his ‘favor’. He’d dropped it on his head, and there he was, sitting in an interrogation room at the FBI again.

Only the Chesapeake Ripper was there too, and Will was absolutely correct; he was closer to Jack Crawford than Jack would ever know. Somehow, that revelation was exciting rather than horrifying in its reality. He wondered if Dr. Lecter had consulted on the case of Mary Mai, considering she’d been his patient.

It didn’t take long for him to report to Jack. Within a few minutes, Brian from the Maestro crime scene was there, setting down documents for Will to sign and explaining the process of his release. Will’s handwriting was a sloppy scrawl, but it was difficult to listen when all that he could think on was facing the Ripper for the first time: no gimmicks, no ruse, no smoke and mirrors.

Just the Chesapeake Ripper. His blood was tingling, spitting. If he was much of a runner, he’d have gone for a run later.

“Dunno how he found you psychologically sound,” Brian was saying as Will stood and stretched. “I’d have you behind bars just for the trouble you alone have caused.

“Guess that’s why he’s the therapist and not you,” Will quipped. “Where’s Jack?”

“He’s in a meeting, but he said that he’d keep in touch.” Keep in touch. It was another way of saying you’d better be sticking around.

The Chesapeake Ripper wasn’t out in the hallway when Will was escorted towards the front desk, nor was he loitering just outside after he had made his phone call and asked Molly to pick him up. Will stood in the cold with the memory of the Ripper playing through his head, over and over and over again. Every time he stood and excused himself, the reel would flicker, turn static then cut short. Every time the ripper walked in the door for the first time and stood with the light from the hallway silhouetting him, there was a moment that Will focused on, despite the bitter cold and the way the tip of his nose was starting to hurt.

The Chesapeake Ripper, for all of his games and his machinations, looked surprised.

Then, the surprise faded, and the game began; it was somehow different, though. Like seeing an old friend and not quite knowing just how to be around them. Seeing him had changed things, and Will wasn’t so upset about being arrested anymore.
Molly met him at the roundabout in front of the building, and she smiled warmly as he climbed in.

“Did you survive your time in county?” she teased.

“I got a few scars from shanks,” he admitted. “A gang tattoo with that poke-and-needle style all the inmates swear by.”

“They let you have any hair trimmers in there? A razor for shaving? You look like you just came off of the set of Castaway.”

She grabbed his jaw and turned his head first one way, then another. He allowed the inspection with good humor, thought of the Ripper maybe watching from a window up above as he told Jack Crawford the sort of person that the Ripper thought him to be. Obviously, his estimation of Will had been good enough to make Jack let him go. Obviously, he’d said enough that Jack couldn’t very well keep him.

He couldn’t play so many games if Will was locked up, could he?

Molly had a way of laughing that warmed from his ears to the tips of his toes. It could have been the heater in the car, but Will didn’t think it was. Caring about Molly Foster was easy. She was the sort of person that made caring second nature, made joking commonplace. Her hair was the perfect hues of blonde, her eyes were the sort that one could call home, and her nose turned up with just enough sass to make her jokes land neatly.

Why she’d ever decided to start dating him again was far beyond Will. He figured she could do much better. She was textbook white picket fence, and while the Ripper certainly thought Will could don such personas –

–well, there was a reason the Ripper first thought they’d be good friends.

Back at her house, they lay sprawled over one another and watched bad television, laughing at the unease of Lifetime movie actors, and for a moment Will wondered just what would happen if he didn’t do what he knew that he had to do next. He wondered what would happen if he just allowed himself to lay there, laughing, and maybe in two years he’d marry her after letting Jack Crawford know just who it was he was gaining psychological insight from.

The moment of hesitation passed, though. He had something important to do.

“How’s work been?” he asked.

“Pretty busy. We’ve begun testing meat for that study I told you about. Some of the results so far have been…well, shitty, actually. Lots of meat claiming strictly beef coming back with turkey or chicken, assorted parts rather than the specific cut they claim it to be.”

“That’s a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

“They’re not going to like what they find, but that’s why they came to the lab. They couldn’t trust their own business to give honest answers, so they found someone that would.”

He held his breath, glanced to her freezer where his own packaging of questionable meat lay. When she muted the TV on the commercials, he exhaled slowly.

“I have a favor to ask,” he confessed.
“Will Graham asking favors is a rarity.”

“I have some meat that also comes from a questionable…source,” he began. “You could include it in your study if you wanted, but really I just need to know what it’s from.”

“Did you pick something up from the farmer’s market? I told you that place doesn’t always sell as advertised,” she teased.

Will forced himself to laugh.

“I just have…a suspicion it’s not what it says it is. I know you’re busy, but if you have the time…”

His voice trailed off as she rolled over onto him, and the look she leveled at him was equal parts suspicion and mischief. No tingling sensation, though. No weird pressure in his chest that he willed to rub away. Molly was Molly, and Will Graham was a certifiable ass hole.

Beverly was surely going to agree with him after they caught up.

"If I have free time, I’ll do it. It’s the meat in the freezer, right?” At his nod, she nodded and rested her chin lightly at the dip in his chest. “You’re not making me run tests on human meat, are you?”

He kissed her rather than have to try and brush off a question like that. Hands rested onto her hips, held tight, and they didn’t unmute the TV when the movie came back on. When he kissed her, he wondered if she could taste his lies; if they were rancid, or if they were as sweet as she claimed them to be.

Chapter End Notes

Hope your Saturday starts later than mine...I'm opening at work today! Enjoy the sun, the *hopefully* great weather, and an even greater weekend! :)
Chapter 17:

Will Graham of ‘Will Intentions’ Arrested in Conjunction with Murder

Will Graham Taken for Questioning at the FBI

Will Graham’s Avid Fans Take to Twitter: A New Cult Following?

Will Graham Wrongfully Arrested in Chesapeake Ripper Case

What’s Next for Will Graham?

“You…want me to stay home?”

“We can’t have you here, Graham…you know I found a god damn reporter in the break room claiming he was the fuckin’ new guy? Some guy in marketing just let him waltz in!”

“Was it Todd from marketing?” Will asked.

Charlie let out an exasperated sort of noise; over the phone, it was hard to tell if it was a sneeze or a snort. “Yeah. Probably gonna fire him.”

Will hoped that Charlie hadn’t been so cavalier when Freddie had broached the topic of firing him. Knowing them, they’d probably brought it up over pasta two blocks down from the office while on lunch.

“Todd is pretty good at his job, Charlie.” That, and he’d helped Will a few times, so Will figured that he owed him. “I can’t just sit at my apartment. There are reporters outside, kids outside –”

“I’ll have you on the clock if you’re working, but you can access e-mails through your personal computer. I’ll send Beverly with the mailed-in letters, but I can’t have you here, Will. We’re the news! You’d fuckin’ think they’d treat us like it; some common ground at least, some common courtesy.”

Will heard him fumble for a lighter, curse; after a heavy exhale of what he could only assume was cigarette smoke, he followed suit and sat out on his balcony, basking in the stench of cloves. It was a bad habit, but he wasn’t stopping anytime soon.

How the hell was he supposed to get his step count in when trapped in his apartment?

“How long until I can come back?” he asked.

“I’ll keep you posted, kid, but this won’t work. I’ve got a newspaper to run.”

Will nodded dismally. “How’s ratings?”

He could all but feel Charlie’s grin on his skin as he said, “Best I’ve seen yet. Keep up the good work, but for fuck’s sake stay the hell away from here.”
Will hung up, and he stared down at the group of people clustered along the sidewalks, some going so far as to stand in the road when there was no traffic. The corner where he stood gave him a small reprieve from being seen, but it wouldn’t last. The moment he finished his cigarette, he stubbed it out and went inside, to better stave off the cold and the bubbling sound of so many voices pressed tightly together, wanting.

His face was plastered on the news. His face was plastered on social media. While before, his hashtag had only a consistently small following, he was currently one of the top trending tags on twitter, everyone weighing in on his mental sanity, his ‘heroism’ and his good looks –or lack thereof, according to several twitter posts. When he realized that the trio of dots would forever continue to load new posts under the hashtag, Will had closed out of the app and left it well enough alone.

He knew his mental state; he didn’t need everyone else jumping in to dissect it, too.

He paced the apartment. He remembered breakfast, as well as coffee, but when Beverly didn’t arrive immediately with letters in hand, he found himself sitting down in front of his laptop, combing through the e-mails half-heartedly. Focus was difficult, knowing what was waiting just outside.

Focus was especially difficult, what with the rampant thoughts of the Ripper going through his head. Their first face-to-face meeting.

And the Ripper hadn’t actually set it up.

At this point, I know you’re in on it...

You poor thing! The Ripper’s going to get you if you’re not careful!

How in the world the FBI let you go is so far beyond me, I can’t believe –

Will Graham & Co.,

I see that you’re less inclined to engage with me.

Am I not so interesting as the Chesapeake Ripper? Do the notes that I compose leave you wanting something? You only needed to say so, and I’d have obliged you with something a little more on the pianissimo scale of sound rather than a loud, grand sort of noise. For some, the intensity of the sound rattles teeth rather than engages the mind. I should have considered that.

Perhaps it is the Ripper himself that keeps you from engaging with me, as that is the only reason I can surmise that you did not receive your last gift. That is easily remedied, if he is the barrier –you and I are both well aware that it is a he, don’t we? Do you see him clearly, or is he still shrouded in grey to you?

If you cannot see him, I most certainly am able to. I’ll get rid of him, if you like.

-Another Avid Fan

Will printed the e-mail, then deleted it. He could only be grateful that Jack Crawford was combing through the written letters, not the ones sent electronically.

-

Beverly showed up with Abigail in tow around lunchtime, and neither looked entirely pleased.
“Someone asked for my autograph,” Abigail said, walking in. She looked around the apartment with the vested interest of someone that knew not to set their expectations high. At the first sight of the couch, she found a comfortable spot on it and watched him.

“Your own avid fan?” Will asked.

“Mine by proxy. They’ve been reading your stuff since you first outed my father.”

Will looked from Abigail to Beverly, and he accepted the small bin of letters gingerly with a nod towards Abigail.

“Abigail had the day off and wanted to see how you lived,” Beverly explained.

Abigail scanned the front room and nodded to herself, as if confirming something. “A bachelor.”

“I’d feel like I was being demoted if Charlie wasn’t paying me to drive over here and work out of your house, too,” Beverly said, and she sat down at his table, taking her laptop and a bag of chips out of her bag. More pita chips. The healthy kind that you had to bite too hard on to get a decent chunk to chew on. “The fight to get in here almost lost me an eyebrow, you know.”

“If I end up making a twitter, I’ll also do a kickstarter for new brows should you lose one,” Will promised.

“I’ll hold you to it.”

He sat down beside her and handed her both of the letters that the Maestro had written, offering no explanation at her questioning expression. Beverly read them with quick, jerking sweeps of her eyes, and the look she sent his way after was difficult to read. Disappointment? Disgust? Unease?

“I don’t want to write about him,” he said before she could say anything. “He’s…needy. Listen to his tone. ‘Am I not so interesting as the Chesapeake Ripper?’ Like he needs validation from me because I’m not engaging with him.”

“That why you kept it a secret?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Among other things. “I didn’t show Lounds. Thought you could do something with it.”

She looked down at the letters and reread them with a little more care. After some thought, she looked out towards his balcony, brow drawn down sharply, her teeth worrying over her bottom lip before she seemed to come to some sort of conclusion.

“I think…we’re getting in over our heads,” she said slowly. “You’re getting personal letters from mentally disturbed people that don’t just stand outside shouting their adoration up at you and post the occasional rant on twitter. These people are dangerous, Will, and now you’re starting to collect them.”

He noticed her glance towards Abigail, how her eyes rested with the sort of weight that said more than words could. Abigail had found the remote and was amusing herself with flipping through channels, chin propped and feet resting on the dingy coffee table. Somehow, the action wasn’t entirely annoying to Will, that she made herself comfortable without him offering. He thought of the Ripper –Dr. Lecter, he mentally corrected himself—wondering at his psyche, that he’d let her stay rather than kick her to the curb.
“What do you think I should do, then, Beverly? Just give everything up?” He dragged his
gaze back from Abigail and looked at Beverly expectantly. “Just go back to the way things were
before people decided that I ‘had the words of a poet but the social graces of an agoraphobic
lobster’?”

“Take your evidence to Agent Crawford,” she urged. “He already hates you, but he’ll let
everything slide if you take all of your evidence to him and explain why you kept it hidden for so
long. Plea a fear for your life or something–anything. This shit is starting to make me nervous.”

Abigail was listening. Her gaze was too fixed on the television, her mouth too tense for the
lighthearted cartoon currently on. Will looked from her to Beverly, and he nodded towards the
balcony.

Outside in the cold, Beverly kept her back to the crowd below in order to give him some sort
of reprieve from their shouting and cries for attention. The look she was currently giving him made
him nervous, something verging on concerned. It was genuine, the emotion, and it made him itch in
places he wasn’t sure how to reach.

“You’re making me nervous,” she reiterated once the sliding door was closed.

“I’m fine.”

Are you, though?” She folded her arms tightly across her chest, as though to steel herself for
what she was about to say. “Look, it’s hard to tell when you’re rattled, Graham. For as long as we’ve
been friends, you’ve been weird. Weirder than most. I chalked it up to high-functioning autism or
something along that spectrum, and I always thought if something was up, maybe you’d reach out.”

“I did reach out,” he pointed out.

“Hardly.” When he opened his mouth, she continued, “you’ve always known when
something was bothering me, and I know you see it now, too. You wanna know what’s bothering
me?”

“Freddie Lounds?” he guessed.

“Always,” she agreed, “but that’s nothing new. No, right now it’s like I’m watching you
from another room, and there’s a window there between us. I can hear and see what you’re doing,
but you don’t…seem to realize that there’s more than that one small room that you’re in. There’s a
whole room next to yours, and one next to that, and another…there’s a whole world out there, and
your actions are directly affecting it.”

As if to punctuate her metaphor, a few people in the crowd began shouting his name in
earnest, begging him to step out from around her.

“You’re making the FBI look like a joke, you’ve got that kid in there hundreds of miles away
from home looking for answers she’ll never find so long as she’s looking for them in you, all of these
avid fans are sending hate mail to the bureau and the local police for daring to have you arrested for
just a couple of hours, you’ve got the news stirred up hunting for a fucking ghost” she continued
ruthlessly. Beverly’s ducks were in a row, and she was going for the kill. “Freddie Lounds is egging
on your need to prove yourself or something, our boss doesn’t care so long as we’re getting ratings,
and you’re lying about where you’re going and what you’re doing just so you don’t have to hear me
get onto you! Meanwhile, you’re in there offering me hand-typed letters from a serial killer as some
piss-poor offering to placate me when all I can think is, ‘When’s this idiot going to wind up dead for
taunting one too many nut jobs? When is he going to cross that line, and will anyone even be there to
Will could taste her fear as well as her fury, equal parts bitter yet sweet in their attentions. He swallowed thickly and couldn’t quite meet her gaze, guilt a weight that sat heavy on his shoulders. He could handle Jack Crawford seeing him as nothing more than a nuisance and a pain. Beverly, though—

She’d never forgive him if she knew what’d happened at the gala; how he’d been mouth to mouth with the Chesapeake Ripper and let him go. How he’d sat there watching the vulnerable part of her back as the Ripper dared him the wonder about her death. Would she still fear for him?

Would she hate him, instead?

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he meant it.

“You know, you made it sound really noble, taking action when the FBI couldn’t. But here we are with another psychopath writing to all of us, Lounds is sniffing around when you’re not there, the FBI is all over the place, and yet it’s hard to see your next step. Are you going to go to Crawford after you meet with this psychiatrist? That’s what you’d said. You confirm his voice, see his face, you go to the FBI. Right?”

Will hadn’t yet told anyone about Dr. Lecter psychologically profiling him at the FBI. When he opened his mouth to say it, though, something stopped short in his throat and forced him to swallow the words down, something that had to do with that pressure in his chest and how it’d felt to sit down across from the bastard and just talk.

He cleared his throat, tried again. “I just need a voice, Beverly. A voice to tie to a face, and we’ve got him right where we want him.”

Beverly squinted at him suspiciously. “And where’s that, exactly?”

He managed to sound completely, one-hundred-percent genuine as he replied, “Dead or in jail, of course.”

Just below, he could barely make out the flashes from what had to be dozens of cameras, people chanting his name as they begged for him to come out of the shadows.

Abigail waited until Beverly left before she spoke.

“Jack Crawford had no choice but to let you go,” she revealed, eyes fixed to the TV. A re-run of Spongebob was on, one that Will recalled from drunken nights during college, dreaming of things he wanted but deep down knew he’d never have.

“How do you figure?” he asked, sitting down beside her. He’d considered pouring himself a finger of whiskey, but with Abigail still there, he held off. It wouldn’t exactly set a good example, him drinking and her watching it. He wondered if her father drank.

“It’s not a figure sort of thing, but truth. Some of your followers on twitter are lawyers, and two of them were meeting up to head towards the headquarters to remind them of your rights. A few reporters interviewed them, and you’ve even got an article on Buzzfeed.”

It was difficult to remember that his arrest was faulty and legally grey at best when realistically, Will knew there was every reason under the sun that he should be behind bars. He took
a gulp of water from the cup at his elbow and nodded appreciatively.

“Maybe I should make a twitter, just to thank them.”

“You should make one because you’re a famous writer, and that’s what famous people do.”

“Adam Driver isn’t on social media,” Will pointed out. At Abigail’s confused expression, he said, “Star Wars? The new villain. He doesn’t want to see what the general public has to say.”

“…The general public is a bunch of ass holes,” Abigail agreed after a painful pause. Likely she’d read almost every article that’d been written about her father. Likely she’d combed through every comment, every thread dissecting her and her family as though they knew what she’d gone through, growing up with someone like that.

“For now, I think I’ll keep to the apartment,” he said. “Twitter can wait.”

Abigail had something else to add, but she wasn’t sure how to say it. She fidgeted, clasped her hands, and stared at the television. When he muted it on commercial, she said:

“Freddie Lounds got a hold of me.”

Will’s stare at the television was impassive. The commercial was something featuring soup. “Did she?”

“It was before your arrest hit social media. I was leaving work, and she cornered me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he meant it. “Did you tell her to fuck off?”

“I did, yeah.” Her bottom lip shook, and she rolled it into her mouth, biting down hard.

“I told her to leave you the hell alone, but she doesn’t listen or follow directions very well.”

Abigail let out a cough of a laugh, her eyes too shiny on a holiday commercial.

“Probably failed her SAT’s because of it. They’re big on following directions.”

And somehow, without warning, her head was in his lap, and she was curled up tight, arms folded across her chest as she watched a laughing family spin about in fake snow, their clothing far too pristine to really be theirs. It was fake, scripted. Sometimes Will felt like that, too, but at least he had his watch to keep him on track. It beeped; a reminder for water.

“I think Beverly hates me,” she confessed quietly. Her voice and shoulders shook, although the rest of her held very, very still.

He wasn’t quite sure what to do in a situation like that, a teenage girl laying on his lap and revealing secrets. He tried to think of her the first time they’d met, angry and bristling with energy as she flayed his character with nothing but words and ire, but the image couldn’t stick. She was alone in the world; there was nothing left but Abigail Hobbs, Will Graham, and his careless words that’d taken the life of her father.

“It takes a lot for Beverly to hate people,” he replied. “I mean, we’re still friends, and I do a hell of a lot worse than you do coming in at weird hours.”

“She watches me.”

“You make her nervous,” said Will, and when she didn’t speak, he lightly brushed a few
strands of hair out of her face. He felt as though he were handling a delicate bird, that the slightest of touches could break her.

“Because I’m the Shrike’s daughter?” she whispered.

“I think that’s at the bottom of her list, actually,” he said thoughtfully. “Mostly the odd hours. She’s not sure your end game.”

“Why is it that all you people seem to ever talk about is this game? What game do you think you’re all playing?”

It was her tone, he supposed hours later, that scalded. The Game: the game with Jack, the game with Freddie, the game with the Ripper, the game with Beverly, the persistent game with the Maestro; he was nothing more than a manipulator, every action done for the sake of furthering his own wants and desires.

Rather than answer, he unmuted the television when Spongebob came back on. He gently swept her hair back, trying to soothe her, and when she fell asleep with her temple propped on his knee, he followed suit with his head tilted back on the couch cushion, an unsettling laughter from the mouth of the sponge following into dreams that haunted him and left him running down dark corridors with no end in sight.

-“Agent Crawford, can you confirm that the Chesapeake Ripper managed to find the body that the Maestro left behind and used it in his own acts of violence towards Tattler News and Will Graham?”

“We do have reason to believe that the Chesapeake Ripper managed to find the body of Thomas Hill before authorities did, although we can’t confirm that Thomas Hill was first a victim of the Maestro,” Jack replied into the mic.

“You can confirm that Thomas Hill was the first chair in the DC Symphony, though,” another reporter chimed in.

From his spot beside Jack, Will looked over the crowd and wished, not for the first time, that he was on the opposite side of the microphones. He hated this shit.

“Yes.”

“This one is for Mr. Graham.”

At Jack’s nudge, Will looked to the reporter in question.

“Are you considering pressing charges against the FBI for wrongful arrest?”

Will leaned slightly towards the mic. “No.”

“May I ask why?”

“They’re just doing their job, same as me.”

“But in doing their job –”

“It’s logic,” Will interrupted. “I can’t fault them for covering their bases. I’ve been fully cooperating with the FBI, and that’s what matters.”
“How do you puzzle out where to find these bodies?” someone else asked from the back.

“Is it true you can figure out his riddles because you think like killers?” another chimed in.

“Do you think the Ripper is going to make an attempt on your life soon?”

“Where do you think —”

“Back to the matter at hand,” Jack interrupted, and Will took that as his cue to step back. He had a headache building behind his eye from all of the flashing lights, and just behind the reporters he could see a crowd clustered around a huge banner that read:

**We Support Will Graham!**

“At this moment, the FBI and the Baltimore City Police are working closely with the DC police to ensure that both the serial killers the newspapers dub ‘Maestro’ and the Chesapeake Ripper are brought to justice. Tattler News and Will Graham are both cooperating fully and aiding the task force in using their peculiar yet valuable resources to find them.”

“Peculiar resources!”

“Just admit it! Will Graham will catch your killer for you!”

Will couldn’t quite focus on the different people shouting, what with the way that the cameras flashed. News presses weren’t exactly his thing, even when he was on the opposite side. Although there was a stereotype for all of the shouting and the people try to speak at once, there was truth to it. He wondered if Freddie often lurked in the mobs of demanding writers, or if she used their confusion and shouting as a distraction to go and investigate on her own.

“We will be taking no further questions at this time. Thank you, and have a good afternoon.”

“What are you going to do about the rising death toll?!?”

“Mr. Graham, do you know who the killer is?!?”

“Mr. Graham –”

Will was ushered kindly into the main entry of the FBI headquarters, the doors shut behind them with guards stationed. Now that his twitter tags had caught the attention of other news outlets, things had escalated.

“I’m glad you think of me as a valuable resource, Jack,” Will said pleasantly once they were alone. While the press would certainly shout to still be heard, hoping to catch someone’s attention, they weren’t foolish enough to follow.

“I said peculiar.”

“I enjoy being useful.”

Jack eyed him and kept his back to the press, arms folded across his chest. It accented the breadth of his shoulders, how he was both cunning and capable of violence, should the need arrive. Maybe he’d get to test that mettle, should Will accidentally say too much.

“Well, you’ve stirred the god damn hornet’s nest. Those little fans of yours are stirring up a lot of trouble, and my boss is breathing down my neck.”
“Mine too. He won’t let me come to the office.”

Jack grunted. “Do what you gotta do, but calm them down. I’ve got them trying to camp out in front of HQ demanding to know what we’re doing to keep you safe rather than keeping you in harm’s way, and I don’t have the time to explain to them that you’re willfully putting yourself right in the line of fire without seeming to give a shit about it.”

Somehow, it sounded both chastising and concerned, his words. Like before, referring to him as both peculiar yet valuable. The Chesapeake Ripper managed to placate him, say just enough that his anger had cooled towards Will. He tucked his hands into his pockets and considered inviting him over for drinks. Maybe Jack would talk about why his ring was still off.

“I’ll see what I can do, but I didn’t even realize I had a following until you arrested me,” said Will.

“Just do something,” he groused. There was a pause, and Will wondered if Jack was feeling uncomfortable, throwing his cards out on the table like that and drawing the line that he had between them. He wondered just what the Ripper had said to make Jack let him go.

As if sensing his train of thought, Jack said, “Dr. Lecter said that you have a hyper-empathy disorder.”

Will hummed non-committedly.

“He said you have the ability to place yourself so far into the position of the person you’re looking at that it’s like you become something like them.”

“Something like them,” Will agreed.

“You’d mentioned something a bit like it when we first spoke, and it got me thinking. You finding this guy, you…understanding this guy. Are you projecting my need to find him, or are you projecting the Ripper’s need to be seen?”

Will looked out to the crowd of reporters, then his fans behind them –his ‘avid’ fans. “It’s not an on and off switch…I can’t just step back, look at it, and tell you who I’m projecting when it happens. I only know when it does, and I try and stop it. I’m helping you track him down because he needs to be found. No more, no less.”

Jack accepted this quietly; Will could feel his stare on his skin, and he looked back to Jack and gave him a crooked smile, unable to help himself.

“I liked Dr. Lecter. He was interesting,” Will said.

“He’s one of the best psychiatrists we’ve ever had consult on a few of our cases. Maybe we’ll have you talk to him a bit more about your thoughts on the Ripper.”

“Can’t wait, Jack.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of your support and feedback as I've written this! Hope you're enjoying your Saturday and making the most of your Summer! (Or for those around the
world...whatever day/season it is, have a good one.)
“Thank you so much for agreeing to meet me!” the girl gushed. She was pretty, in that I-can’t-remember-quite-what-my-natural-hair-color-is sort of way. Large eyes, thick eyeliner. She ran a blog online and had Will Graham’s face all over it. He wasn’t quite sure when it popped up, but readers assured her that they’d still follow her work *if* the Will Graham fad faded.

“Of course,” Will replied. “I didn’t realize that people were following this so closely. When I saw everyone’s insightful comments, as well as your support as I tried to keep journalistic integrity, I thought that you had some interesting ideas. Your theories.”

“My theory that you already know who it is? Yeah, I know. Not many people believe me. I wrote to you, but you didn’t respond.”

They were seated outside of a coffee shop that didn’t make coffee, and whose only idea of something closely resembling coffee was an espresso. Anything else on the menu had syrup or energy drinks in it. Will settled for a pumpkin spice latte because it felt right at that time of year, and he added another coffee to his watch. He needed to drink water soon.

“Sorry.”

“No, I get it. You’re busy.”

“I have been lately, yeah,” Will agreed.

“So you meeting me means that I’m right, right? You know who it is?”

Will laughed. “I was more interested in you talking about your publisher that would love a writer that could engage like I did. I was going to ask if you could see about presenting a manuscript for me anonymously.”

He didn’t like talking himself up like that. The brag felt forced, pushy, but Nicole didn’t seem to mind. She squinted, much the same way she had when she first walked up to the table, and she adjusted her cat-eye glasses. From writer to writer, she seemed to be able to see bull shit a mile away.

“You have a manuscript?”

“Something I’ve been kicking around for a bit. I think that just about now is the most convenient time to present it.”

“Not meaning to sound rude, since I like you Mr. Graham, but what am I getting out of this?”

Will smiled, and he reached into his pocket, tugging out the handkerchief with care. He set it on the table between them, catching Nicole’s eye.

“That handkerchief,” he said, maintaining eye contact, “belongs to the Chesapeake Ripper. I took it from him.”

Nicole looked from him to the handkerchief, and she snatched it up with hardly a breath, her
grip tight enough to tell Will that he now had her undivided attention.

“When you look over that manuscript and send it in for me, I’ll let you post about whatever you like. With this as evidence when that time comes.”

Nicole looked from the handkerchief to Will; her grip didn’t slacken. “Why do you care so much about who this publisher is?” she asked. “She’s amazing, don’t get me wrong, but why her? Why me?”

He finished his drink before he answered. Just around them, there was the gentle murmur and discussions of holidays between friends, the plans just ahead and what lay on the horizon. Normal, calming things. His watch beeped to remind him to drink water.

“I heard that she is willing to publish anyone with a good story. Someone that can see when something’s real and make the most out of it.”

“Yeah?” Nicole pocketed the handkerchief, her silent agreement.

Will stood up and threw his cup away. “I've got something she’s going to like. That’s all.”

Jack picked Will up on the steps of Tattler News before the news vans and avid fans could quite get to him. It was the day before Will’s appointment with Dr. Lecter. Will didn’t quite like to admit it, but there was something exciting about Jack stopping him; he wondered if the agent had figured out that something wasn’t adding up.

“Find something?”

“A body. The Maestro.”

He didn’t quite deflate at the mention of the bastard’s name, but something close to it. Will was getting just about tired of the Maestro and his nosiness. His need to be seen. Will Graham & Co.

They rode to the scene in silence. It was an hour or so of countryside dusted in a powder of snow, and Will Graham tracked rolling hills that gave way to branches stripped of their green. The FBI sprung for electric heaters in the leather seats, and Will indulged a little.

The body was found in an open amphitheater in the middle of Wolf Trap National Forest that would normally showcase theater or performances for campers. He stood at the top for longer than was necessary; this he only found out after Jack shouldered past him, headed down with the steps of a man that was maybe getting just a little too tired of this shit. Will wondered about his absent wedding band. Maybe he should have asked in the car.

Snow had fallen in the time between the body being placed and the body being found. Will huddled into his peacoat and tried to breathe through his nose, the air just bitter enough to make his throat uncomfortable. Forensics was busy dusting away at the snow that’d given a fine layer to Mr. Peters’ final form. It was like unearthing a rare and grotesque artifact; each sweep of the soft-bristled brush showed more and more of the mystery beneath.

It sounded an awful lot like Lacrimosa was on the wind. Will could remember it from listening to the old lady next door, the window open to her music room where children did their best to recreate works of art on introductory, factory-glued pieces of garbage. They’d get better with time, she would reassure parents. Maybe invest in a nicer violin, and it wouldn’t sound so squeaky? Maybe some steel strings? Cat gut strings? Maybe don’t buy from Amazon Prime next time?
The notes that hummed when he laid eyes on Mr. Peters came from the belly of a rich and aged cello, something whose notes mellowed and curved around the sound of his death. Despite the build-up of music that’d grown with each death, with each frustrating note as Will willfully ignored the Maestro, this felt somehow anti-climactic in comparison, something soothing and yearning. Will rubbed his ear agitatedly. He wondered of the Ripper had seen the body, too.

“This guy isn’t in any orchestra that I know of,” Jack said when Will made it down the final few steps. “Thirty-eight, single, rents a house somewhere out here.”

Will stared at the mop of unruly brown hair, and he could hazard a guess.

“He also left this,” Jack continued, passing the note over. Rather than look at Will, he continued to stare at Mr. Peters, brow set. His avoiding Will’s face was more telling than the note would be.

“How’s your wife, Jack?” Will couldn’t help but ask. He took the note and held it tight in his left hand, stalling although he couldn’t say why.

Jack side-eyed him, lip curling. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not wearing a wedding band.”

He could tell that Jack didn’t want to answer. Despite the murmur and hum of the forensics team moving about the seats, gleaning everything over for clues, it felt as though there was nothing more than the music, Will, and Jack. His fingers tapped lightly along the paper.

There was no way in hell Jack was going to give him a copy of it. His corkboard would have to miss out on a note.

“Died,” Jack said. There was nary a flicker of emotion as he said it. “She died.”

Will wasn’t sorry for the death—at least there was one death that he didn’t feel some form of culpability for. He looked down to the letter, a weird tightness in his throat.

“My condolences,” he said, and that was as far as he’d go without feeling like an ass about it. He didn’t ask why Jack wasn’t wearing a ring if it was a death that’d taken her and not someone else.

Will Graham & Co.,

The next stanza, I’ll admit, is a stepping stone to the final act. When the Conductor is trying to reach out to the many musicians of their ensemble, more often than not there are one or two persons that refuse to do as they’re asked. The rest of the musicians may reach out, the conductor may also attempt private tutoring or various angles to attempt to make them see reason –

In the end, there are some that do not comply. They must be removed from the symphony so that the performance may continue unhindered.

Does Jack Crawford feel close to finding the Chesapeake Ripper? Does he feel close to finding me? As the conductor, I feel a certain responsibility in helping. Perhaps I will catch your killer for the both of you.

-Archer Avid Fan

Will stared at the letter, then at the body in front of him. In that moment, he’d have liked to
have felt fear in realizing that he was one of the ones that Maestro felt the need to remove because he wasn’t complying with ‘the plan’. In truth, there was nothing more than a flicker of annoyance, a feeling that out of all of the places he needed to be, this wasn’t one of them. Beside him, Jack held still and waited for him to speak, a certain energy about his silence.

“You ever see something like this?” Will asked.

“Serial killers competing for the attention?”

Will snorted. “I wouldn’t call it competing. You’ve got one going off on their own, killing, and the other’s just trying to catch up.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a favorite, Will.”

Will opened his mouth to reply with something particularly snarky, but he snapped it shut and circled the body instead. Jack’s wife was dead, and she’d died recently. Given everything he’d done—and arguably what he was going to do—he owed it to Jack to be a little nicer.

There was nothing special about the body. It was dressed much the same as the others, the only giveaway about the intentions behind it being the curled brown hair. Will supposed that that was something to consider about himself, that the open and exposed throat didn’t rattle him as it had the first time. Hearing the music had made him nervous, made him wonder at himself.

Just what was he becoming that now, all that he could feel was a vague flicker of annoyance at the timing? The presumption?

His watch beeped: Get ready for lunch.

“We can assume he’s coming after me,” Will said when he finished his lap.

“Or the Ripper.”

“Does he know who the Ripper is?” Will wondered. “If so, maybe we just need to follow the blood trail. This is personal to him.”

“Looks like you’re personal to him,” Jack corrected.

“Maybe. Maybe he knows me, maybe he’s just getting really mad I’m not addressing him in the column. Maybe I keep ignoring him, and it draws him out for you to bring him in.”

“Will,” Jack said, and something in his voice made Will look up from the way snow had gotten inside of the man’s throat, clung to the bleached vocal cords. The wind stirred, dancing small swirls of powder off of the stage. “I got a call from my boss. As of right now, they’re wanting to bring you in and keep you until we can get this under control. The more you’re out in the public eye, the more in danger you are. The more in danger the public is.”

Will didn’t hesitate to let the words sink in. “No.”

“It’s not a request.”

“You can’t—I don’t want—”

“Honestly, I got my ass chewed for how long I left you out here, but that’s neither here nor there. Where the Maestro is specifically targeting you, we’re moving you to a special safe house. I thought maybe showing you just how much danger you were in would help you come to that
conclusion on your own, but…”

Jack didn’t finish his thought, and he didn’t have to. Will looked from him to the body, a strangled laugh trying to gurgle out.

*Are serial killers your muse?*

“Either way, this has gone on long enough,” Jack carried on when Will didn’t speak. His tone brooked no argument. “We’re going to get you taken care of, but first and foremost we’re going to keep you safe. With, or without your consent.”

It wasn’t until they were on their way back from the crime scene that Will found the right words.

“You’re not stupid, Jack,” he said.

Jack glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, but said nothing.

“You know protocol. You know rules, regulations, and the right steps to take,” Will continued, staring out of the passenger window. “You’ve been doing this a long time.”

“I have.”

“So you’d know that protocol said the moment the Ripper sent, oh, I don’t know, the third letter, I should have been pulled. But I wasn’t.”

“That was a mistake that –”

“Don’t bullshit me, Jack,” Will interrupted, and he looked back to Jack with a mildly unsettling smile. “You let me keep my freedom because you hoped it’d bring the Ripper to your front door. I was bait, only you didn’t want me to think I was.”

“You weren’t complaining about it,” Jack pointed out.

“I wasn’t,” Will agreed.

“If you’d asked to be taken to a safe house, I’d have had you there in a heartbeat.”

“Yeah, I know.” Will looked back to the window and tracked the gently rolling hills of snow. The wind often picked up just enough of it to create small, hollowed mounds that rolled and carried across the ground, gaining more snow and momentum as they went. One poor step, and your foot would just keep going until you found yourself hip-deep in the mess of it. Chilled to the bone.

“I’d have never compromised your safety.” Jack sounded as though he were trying to convince himself just as much as he was Will.

“You did, Jack,” Will replied. “Don’t worry, I’m not mad about it. Just trying to let you know that blowing smoke up my ass to tell me you should have pulled me sooner is a shit excuse, and you know it. You haven’t lied to me yet. Don’t make a habit of it now.”

Silence, save for the humming of the heater and the faint catches of music in the background. Jack Crawford played smooth jazz on the radio.

“She’s fought cancer for a year now,” Jack finally said. His voice was raw with the kind of emotions Will didn’t want to share in. “My wife. I’d hoped to catch the Ripper before she died. She’d heard enough about him over the years. It feels…wrong to wear her band until I’ve got him. I
think I’ll be able to put it back on once I do.”

He found himself taking on some of it anyway – mostly the grief, the loss. Will curled his bottom lip into his mouth, bit down hard. It seemed that no matter what Jack did, he was destined to lose. No matter how hard he fought, it would never be good enough. Will couldn’t be mad about Jack using him as bait, not when he had such a need at stake. People that always lost became desperate. People that always lost either continued to lose, or they found a way to change the game so that they could win.

“I’ve got a therapy appointment tomorrow with Dr. Lecter, Jack,” Will said when they started to hit traffic going back into DC. “I understand that you’re pulling me, but can I just have a couple of days to get my shit in order?”

Jack didn’t respond to that until they were pulling up alongside Tattler News, where Will’s ‘avid fans’ were waiting with signs and baskets of treats. He put the car in park, looked over, and gave Will a long, searching stare. It was reminiscent of the first time Will had ever spoken with him, seated just across from one another at the coffee shop. Things had spiraled since that moment, left Will hitting the ground running with no time to look back.

“We’re taking you to the safehouse on Saturday,” Jack finally replied. “Whether you’re ready or not.”

“Got it.” Will opened the door and climbed out, sliding his messenger bag over his shoulder. When he went to close the door, he paused, shifting his weight from one foot to the other as he tried to find the right words. This wasn’t a piece of paper. This wasn’t a word doc. That he could tinker with until perfect. This was a person. “Thanks, Jack. For…understanding.”

Jack grunted an affirmative. “Saturday, Will.”

“Yeah, Saturday,” Will agreed, and he shut the door, hurrying past the crowd that tried to rush him with cries of adoration and questions about the Chesapeake Ripper.

- 

Hannibal Lecter’s office was a private practice with a fenced in courtyard and an elegantly painted door sign. Will was five minutes early, and after signing in and filling out the appropriate paperwork, he idled in the waiting room with a sense of unease coupled with excitement wrestling in his guts. The couches were upholstered, nary a magazine out of place on the freshly dusted coffee table; the receptionist didn’t sneak glances at him as though she were questioning what he was there for.

His watch beeped to tell him that he’d better be at Lecter’s office. He swiped the notification away, as well as a reminder that Beverly had texted, and Molly had called twice. He thought to pace, to release the emotions that curled and licked along his short breaths, but reason overcame him. He had to play it calm. He glanced down, allowed his glasses to tilt and adjust crookedly. He had to lie, and he had to be very, very careful while doing it.

Thankfully, among many of his other talents, lying was indeed one of them. As of late, he’d come to know that fact intimately.

He stood when the door opened, and he stared for quite some time when he met the gaze of the man that stood across from him. He had to fight the self-satisfied smirk that threatened to crawl onto his face.
Dr. Hannibal Lecter was handsome in an unconventional way. Poised in the doorway of his office, he wore a blue suit with thin white pinstripes, shoes a polished brown that matched the pocket square in his suitcoat. He was broad-shouldered, but it tapered to narrower hips. His cheekbones were high, his eyes deep-set. Thin lips were set in a placid, emotionless line, and his jaw was illegal in twelve states. Hair was combed, face was clean-shaven; in truth, he was the antitheses to Will Graham’s own mildly abused suit and scruffy beard.

“Will Graham, come in,” he said, and Will’s heart lurched. He followed him into an office, hardly aware of the feeling of feet pressing into carpet, moving him forward. He could only repeat those four words in his mind, in that voice, his pulse in his throat, his skin becoming somewhat clammy. The FBI had been a surprise; this time, they were on an even playing field.

Will could hardly wait.

The office was just as tastefully decorated as the waiting room, rich mahogany wood and oil paintings of lovely scenery. To the far side was a fireplace and a desk, and in the center of the room sat two comfy looking leather chairs that faced one another.

“A pleasure to see you so soon,” Dr. Lecter –the Ripper –said, extending his hand. “I think we’d both agree that it is on much better terms than an arrest.”

It took Will a moment longer than necessary to shake his hand, but he did, awkwardly studying the two leather chairs. They looked arranged more for a stand-off than an actual conversation.

“Yeah, thanks for that,” he said, looking back to Lecter. “Whatever you said did the job.”

“I assure you that all that I did was tell the truth,” he replied, a quick smile flitting over his lips. It slipped past the professional veneer that he held, made it just a little easier to see the Ripper beneath. A secret for the two of them. The truth, but only just.

“Please, have a seat,” Lecter continued, motioning to the chairs. Will nodded, made his way to the one where his back wasn’t to the door, and he sat down in it, easing into the supple leather with only the mildest of stiffness. “Have you done this before?”

“Therapy?” Will asked, looking around. The loft above housed nothing but books upon books upon books, and he studied them with interest before he looked back to Lecter now seated across from him. “Oh, yes. Several times.”

“How did it work out for you?” he asked. He sat much the way Will thought he might, one leg crossed elegantly over the other, hands clasped in his lap. His expression was still blank, still shuttered to whatever thoughts had to be rushing though his mind. Was he surprised to see Will? Angry? Afraid? Impressed?

God, Will kind of hoped he was impressed. Afraid as well would be a bonus.

“Not too well. One of them told me I kept anticipating her questions, so I knew how to avoid them,” he admitted. He rubbed his ear, stopped when he realized the motion. Lecter’s eyes tracked it the way a bird of prey tracked a mouse in a field.

“Why now, then?”

Will smiled. “Because I finally found something interesting to talk about.”
Dr. Lecter didn’t speak for a while, and Will finally looked away from the corner of his glasses, startled to see an intent, probing expression. It was not so obvious as others, but there was a sensation like he could see into the back of his mind, peel the layers of the skin and find the truth beneath. Will made sure to hold very, very still.

“I’d like to help you, if I’m at all able,” Lecter said. He shifted and rested his hands on the arm rests. “I tend to recommend appointments at least once a week, increasing to two should the need arise but no more. My rate is two hundred per hourly session, although if you are of a lower income I do have a sliding rate.”

“I can pay,” Will assured him.

“If I may, can I ask how you were referred to me?”

“You come highly recommended off of google,” Will replied. That seemed to amuse the Ripper; at least, his eyes lit up and the edge of his lip turned. Will tracked its movement, then looked back to the edge of his glasses.

“How many therapists have you been to before you found your way to me?”

“…Growing up, my dad made me see one, once. Then there was one in high school, one my graduating year, one in the second year of college, and one right around graduating there.” He ticked them off on his fingers, wriggling them with some small bit of irony. “I guess the difference is that I’m seeking one out this time rather than someone shoving them at me.”

They met eyes again, and something taut was pressed to Will’s ribs, testing. There was a set to Lecter’s shoulders, like he was prepared to lash out at any moment. Will didn’t jump up to accuse, though –that would spoil the fun.

“What sort of thoughts intrude in the spaces of your mind?” Hannibal asked. “What most would you like to talk about?”

“Killing, Dr. Lecter,” he said, and he rubbed his mouth like he could soften the harsh sound of the consonant. “I think a lot about death.”

Hannibal nodded like he’d been expecting this, like he’d been waiting for this. “Do you fantasize about how you’d take someone’s life?”

“It’s more like…I recreate how someone else did it.” Will shifted, crossed a leg in order to match the Ripper’s. “Is this a session today, Dr. Lecter? Or is this some kind of consultation?”

“I have the time; consider this your first session, free of charge.” He shifted in his chair, crossed his legs the other way to get comfortable. “At the very least, you can ascertain whether or not the two of us would be a good fit.”

“I’m not worried so much about that,” Will replied. He tamped down the urge to show just how smug he felt. “…When I was twelve, I was put into special education classes because my social skills were sub-par. I was tested and found to be on the autistic spectrum, but high-functioning enough that I was allowed back into regular classes after I saw a few therapists and doctors. Things were…fine. Normal.

“In high school though, we were in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina happened, and there was…a lot of death. There was a lot of looting, desperation, murders…fear. There was a lot of fear.”
“Is that when they discovered that you have hyper-empathy disorder?” Lecter asked.

“Is it that obvious?”

“When one knows what to look for, yes. Tell me, do those glasses have a prescription?”

“No.”

“You avoid eyes.”

“Eyes are distracting,” Will explained. “When you’re trying to see something more than a physical appearance, eyes get in the way of everything else.”

“And I’m sure with your lack of love for many things, why look for something you don’t care to see?”

Will nodded at that, glanced down and pressed his palms together, lining up the fingers with careful precision. It reminded him of his last stint in therapy, a feeling of a cheese grater on his eyes, although he had to remind himself that he’d chosen to be here. He’d *chosen* to sit down in this room. Because this was the lair of the Chesapeake Ripper.

“I have a confession,” he said, and he didn’t look up. He could imagine the look on the Ripper’s face at a statement like *that*. “While you may have gotten me out of an arrest, Dr. Lecter, it looks like Agent Crawford’s ability to keep me out on the streets is coming to an end.”

“An end?”

Apparently I’m drawing too much attention to myself. I’m being taken to a safe house.”

“A safe house,” he mused, and Will glanced up in time to see the Ripper’s careful mask slip, a flicker of annoyance in the set of his jaw as he cupped his chin in hand and stared across the room contemplatively.

“I thought to tell you,” Will said. “If you thought we were a good fit, I was going to request a last-minute appointment for tomorrow. Just to get my affairs in order before I’m sent away somewhere that you can’t reach.”

There was silence once more in the spacious office. Will kept time with his heartbeats as the Chesapeake Ripper deliberately rose up and went to his desk, taking the time to grab a pen and casually open a small, leather bound book. He glanced across the way at Will, then down to the paper, and he jotted a couple of things down, shoulders squared.

“I can make time for tomorrow at seven-thirty sharp,” he said. “Does that suit you?”

“Do you trust me to be on time?” Will asked.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter looked up from his paper once more, and the smile he gave was something borderline feral. The shadows filled the hollowed spaces of his cheekbones, and Will wondered if that was how he looked when he first observed Will drive a knife into someone’s gut.

When no one was watching, did he always appear so hungry?

“Only time will tell,” he said calmly, and he nodded towards Will’s watch when it beeped. “Perhaps if you program it into your watch, you won’t be late.”
And Will couldn’t help but laugh, completely calm and somehow at ease, even as the doctor saw him out of his office with a hand pressed to the small of his back.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late posting...it is as it's always been, I'm afraid --work.

I always counted myself lucky that jobs just kind of fell into my lap, so now that I'm getting rejected left and right, it's a bit disheartening? I'm almost considering applying to retail jobs closer to home as long as they match pay just to cut out my commute. I'd do it, but half of the point of applying to new jobs was to get out of retail. We'll see! Keeping my head up, y'all. Have a dang good day.
Chapter 19:

Molly was waiting for him at his apartment that night, pacing just in front of his door. He’d ignored her persistent calls the entire way home, his educated guess based off of what he knew of Molly Foster proving entirely true:

“What the FUCK, Will Graham,” she seethed, throwing an abused plastic bag at him. It hit him in the chest where he caught it, hands curling around a couple of very familiar packages.

“What?”

“Are you –are you fucking kidding me –you –fucking –”

He stared at her, and when she seemed at a loss for words that didn’t begin with the letter ‘F’, he skirted around her, unlocked the apartment door, and let her in. He’d rather the verbal undressing be private rather than where his indifferent albeit crochety neighbors would see.

“Did you call the police?” he asked, setting his keys on the counter.

“I fucking should!” she hissed, following after him. “What the fuck are you dragging me into, you inconsiderate, fucking –”

“Is it human meat?” Will asked impatiently.

Silence. Molly stared at him, squared-up with nothing separating them but the dining room table and a suspicious plastic bag full of meat. She clenched her jaw, unclenched it. As if needing something to ground her, she gripped the chair just in front of her, fingers flexing against it. Will wondered if she’d try to throw it at him.

“I am owed something,” she said, dangerously quiet. Her voice shook with her rage. “And it’d better be a God damn explanation.”

“I know who the Chesapeake Ripper is, Molly,” he said, and the color drained from her face. “I…didn’t acquire the meat through entirely legal means.”

“Did you –”

“Jesus Christ, no,” he replied shortly. “I found it in the guy’s freezer, alright? But I can’t really tell the FBI that I broke into the Chesapeake Ripper’s house and stole from him, can I?”

Molly scoffed and looked heavenward. “Is this the Investigative Journalism that Beverly warned me about?”

“You’ve been talking to Beverly?”

“Of course I’ve been talking to Beverly, you ass,” she snapped. “The only person in this world that knows the Will Graham that I know is Beverly. But it really seems like the only Will Graham we know is the Will Graham that you want us to know! What the hell is going on with you?
What the *fuck* are you getting yourself into?"

He hadn’t quite thought about her reaching out to Beverly. He’d been so convinced of Beverly being against him dating Molly again that he’d hoped it’d be enough of a deterrent.

Apparently not.

“I’m trying to catch this guy, Molls,” he said, and in the face of her indignant horror, he softened his voice, turned his shoulders in. “Don’t you see that? They can’t catch him through legal means, so I’m trying to catch him the only way I know how.”

“By making me unknowingly run tests on human meat?” she snapped.

“I didn’t know it was human until you confirmed it.”

“The fact that you’d risk something so utterly stupid –”

“Do you trust me, Molly?” Will asked. For some reason, he needed dearly to hear her answer.

Molly stared at him, hard. She’d always been the type to give really good, intense stares, the sort of person that made it apparent just what she thought of you at any given time. Molly wasn’t good at hiding, at shying away from direct conflict. Will had always admired it, although that was more than likely part of the reason their relationship had skirted to a dismal, curt end. While she kept trying to peel back his layers, he put up more and more barriers with every passing day.

“You asked me the same thing when we broke up,” she said at last, grinding her teeth. A bad habit from high school, she’d once confessed to him, whispers hushed under an ancient night sky. “You asked if I could trust you.”

“Can you?”

“I…honestly, I don’t know. You used to say to me, “I love you, Molls.” You remember?”

“I remember.”

“Yeah, it was cute. You’d sound so earnest.” Her lips pressed flat. “When we had our last fight, I told you that you reminded me of a mirror. It’s like…you just reflect back to people what they’re trying to see. Sometimes you’d tell me you love me, and I’d believe it. Sometimes, though…sometimes you’d say it, and it was like a completely different person was speaking to me. I didn’t believe you, those times.”

“I’m just Will, Molly.”

“I know, but it’s like you’d catch someone else in the reflection, and suddenly you didn’t know how to love anymore.”

Will stared at her across the table, then considered the meat in the bag. His throat was tight, and the thundering in his chest was unsettling at best. In that moment, he wondered just who he was reflecting to make her so angry. The Ripper? The Maestro, persistent to the end? Beverly, nosing for that next leg up in the writing world?

“I’m trying to catch him,” he said, and it sounded just right. His words, not a reflection. Not a mirror. “I know I’ve had to do some unorthodox things, and this was one of them. I’m sorry I lied to you, but this…I can’t explain it, Molly, but this is important to me.”
“Important,” she repeated flatly.

“Yeah, important.”

“I’m going to need more than that, Will,” she coaxed. The anger hadn’t fled, but she wasn’t using the ‘F’ word anymore—a good sign.

“I honestly didn’t mean for things to happen as they have, but you haven’t really known me in a long time. I was just…I was fading, okay? I felt like I was fading away, like if I walked out into traffic, they’d not even see me to stop before I got run over. Sometimes…I’d sit there and wonder if I’d actually get hit, or if the car would just pass right through me.” Will gestured with the bag, then set it on the table between them. He jabbed at it for emphasis. “This? This here…everything that’s happened since that stupid column came out, it’s made me feel more…solid. Grounded. Awake and…and real, Molly.”

“There are more important things in this world than solving a murder,” she said softly. “Is that it? You didn’t get into the FBI, so this is your way of living that fantasy?”

“I don’t give a shit about the FBI,” Will replied pleasantly. “I felt like I was nothing substantial, and now I’m very aware of my two feet on the ground and where I’m going with them. Because of me, the FBI can catch a very bad man, but I wouldn’t care of it was the FBI or even just a damn mall cop. I’d just…rather beg forgiveness than ask permission. I figure, a plea deal for my breaking and entering, and with your results in the lab and a few other things, I’ve got everything I need.”

Molly eyed him, but he couldn’t have said if it was pity or suspicion that she leveled at him—a mix of both, probably. Pity at his place in the world, how no matter how one looked at things, Will Graham was nothing special in the grand scheme of things.

And yet…not anymore. Not after this.

“When are you taking this to Jack?” she asked.

“Tomorrow. I was waiting on you, and now I have what I need.”

Molly let out a slow, ragged breath and nodded. In that moment, she was likely regretting getting involved with him again, regretting every second since he called her right after breaking into Hannibal Lecter’s house.

“I’m going to go,” she said, and she looked back to him. “You keep me posted. I trust you, but…I don’t trust all of you.”

“That’s fair,” Will agreed. “Sometimes, me too.”

She left after, and she didn’t kiss him on the way out. Likely the idea of intimacy when he’d made her handle human meat—albeit with gloved hands, surely—was appalling to her, uncomfortable at the breach of trust.

Then again, maybe she was just marinating on their first conversation since their break-up years before:

“I can be sociable. How’s this: how have you been, Molly? Are you still working in the bio labs at GWU?”

Her laughed was muffled, but he still heard it. “Yes, I have. I’ve been promoted.”
“Wow, that’s…that’s great,” he said, and he meant it. “I’ve been writing wedding announcements.”

Will took the report out of the bag and smoothed it out on the table, wrinkled but still official. He weighed it with paper weights to help loosen the wrinkles in it, and when he felt brave enough, he repackaged the meat that Molly had ignorantly cut into, tucking it away carefully into the back of the freezer. His watch beeped: Get Ready for Bed.

As he dreamed, he dreamt of Mary Mai, and he wondered if she’d ever had to tell herself to Wake Up, too.

- 

He called Abigail in the morning when he was running errands, doing ‘footwork’ as Charlie called it.

“Okay, your friend is officially going to kick me out of the apartment,” Abigail said by way of greeting.

“What?”

“I lost my job at Subway.”

“…How do you lose a job at Subway?” Will wondered.

“A customer spilled their drink on the floor on purpose just to watch me clean it up, so I tried to ask him to leave. They complained to my manager, and he fired me.”

Will sighed and thanked the man in the office he was currently in, signing off an addressed parcel. “How much money do you have?”

“Enough to eat, but she said if I can’t keep a job then I’m out.” Abigail paused the appropriate amount of time before continuing, “Can I stay with you?”

He strolled out of the office on the corner next to a hole-in-the-wall deli and walked down the streets. A few blocks up was his next stop, work. There were still vans parked just outside, reporters lurking and hoping to catch a wayward employee of Tattler News.

He kind of hoped they found Todd from Marketing.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Abigail. I’ve got a serial killer hunting me.”

“Doesn’t sound like he’s hunting you. Sounds like he’s flirting with you.”

Will scowled and stopped at the crosswalk. “Jack’s going to take me to a safe house soon, and I don’t think he’ll allow you to come along.”

That stopped her. Abigail was quiet as he headed across the crosswalk with the rest of the crowd. For a second, he wondered if he’d hung up on her, and he glanced down to the screen then lifted it back up. “Abigail?”

“You’re going to a safe house?” she clarified.

“That’s why I called to talk to you. I don’t know what’s going to be happening the next day or so, but I wanted to let you know.”
“But you don’t know where you’re going?”

“No, but it looks like they’ve gotten tired of me corresponding with a serial killer. They’re going to try and lure him out with me.”

“Hasn’t worked the whole time they’ve been trying to use your column as a lure,” Abigail pointed out, and somehow there was something savage to it. “What, do they think he’ll just turn himself in since he can’t write letters to you anymore?”

“I think maybe it’s more along the lines of ‘if he gets mad he might make a mistake in the next kill’. Not a good plan, but their best plan. He’ll likely go dormant again like he’s done before.”

“Then what happens to you?”

He loitered by the food trucks and waved off the offer of a free sample of a crepe.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. Kind of the truth, kind of the lie. He knew, but couldn’t say for certain.

“And…me?”

And that was what rubbed at Will, chafed and left sores. He rubbed at his face and paced, finally relenting and buying a cup of coffee from the truck so he’d have something to do with his hands. He palmed it slowly, sitting on a bench.

“That’s why I’m calling, Abigail.” He watched a few passersby, ignored the buzzing on his watch –likely a reminder. He had a schedule to keep. “Beverly won’t kick you out. She’ll just tell you to get another job quick.”

“I think she knows you’re up to something,” Abigail said.

He stared at his coffee cup, a buck for a medium roast that smelled crisp in the cold air.

“You think I’m up to something?”

“You know how to think like my dad,” Abigail said, “I think by nature you’re always up to something.”

“Abigail –”

“I’m just saying, if you do something, don’t…leave me behind, okay?”

Will looked down at the coffee cup in hand, taking a sip.

“Where do you think I’d be going, Abigail?”

“I don’t know where, and I don’t care. Deniable plausibility, right?”

He laughed, and he looked across the street where a few more food trucks were pulling up. Breakfast rushes were just as popular in the cities as the lunch rushes, people awake too late to make their own breakfast, all for the sake of sleeping just five more minutes.

“I’m not your father, Abigail.”

“I never said I thought you were.”
“I don’t know…what I could be to you, then. We’re not the same, I just…saw him as he was.”

“You saw him the way no one else did.”

“And?” Will pressed.

“And…and, I think it’s closure. You’re closure, and I’m not done with that yet.”

That was something. Will watched a woman shout into her phone, storming by and ignoring the flashing warning hand telling her not to enter the crosswalk. When someone blared their horn at her, furious, she flipped them the bird.

“Well, if I do some hairbrained scheme that you seem to think I am, I’ll take you along. How’s that.”

Abigail’s smile could be felt through the phone, and he wasn’t sure how to feel about it. “Deal.”

“No.”

“Sir, I just –”

“Fucking, you fucking think –no, just no.”

Will watched smoke spew about, cloying with just a hint of mint. Menthols. Charlie had swapped to menthols.

“It’s not really something to debate. I just thought I’d give you notice.”

“A two weeks, Graham? You’re trying to give me a fuckin’ two weeks?”

His glare was murderous. Probably the worst Will had ever seen since first getting hired, fresh out of college and scraping by working part time at a garage.

“I give you the chance of a fucking lifetime working so high up after the kind of dry shit you crapped out for a few years working weddings. And this is what you do? The pot gets hot, so you’re leaving the god damn kitchen?”

“I think there are just some things that –”

“Freddie told me I should have fired you years ago, yet here you are taking advantage of my fucking kindness and letting you work in my office, letting you make it big over a few cracks about killers.”

Will wished he’d brought his own cigarettes. He could have desperately used one.

“Charlie, it’s not like that.”

“Oh? It’s not? Then tell me like it is, Graham, tell me how you see it.”

Will sat down since it felt like it was going to take awhile.

“I’ve got all the questions already answered, I’ve got final explanations ready for edits.
Maybe being hunted by serial killers isn’t so exciting as it should be to me.”

“So you’re hiding? You’re just fucking quitting?”

Will nodded, eyed the same sun-abused water cooler by the window. It was likely cold, though from the lack of heat in the office. He was glad he’d brought his coat.

“I’m trying to stay alive, really, if it’s all the same.”

“If you think you’re coming back to work here after quitting right when shit is getting good _-”

“Thank you, Charlie, for every opportunity you’ve given me. I won’t be returning to Tattler News.”

He sat still while Charlie puffed on his cigarette, stewing. He was entirely sure that this wasn’t standard protocol regarding the giving of two weeks; surely after presenting the letter he was free to go? It wasn’t right to leave just yet, though, considering how close to an aneurism he appeared to be.

Maybe he’d actually been in line to take over after Freddie on the front page one day.

Maybe there was a reminder he could have set on the watch to tell him to care about things like that?

“I’d like to say I won’t give you a good reference, but you gave me good numbers, kid,” Charlie said, scowling. His pulse beat a frenzy at his temple. “You end this with a bang, and maybe I overlook just how much shit you’re about to put me through when you walk out those fucking doors.”

“Tell Freddie maybe I never wanted her job after all,” Will suggested politely.

“I think you’re making a dumb move, kid,” Charlie said as Will felt it right to stand up.

Will headed to the door and puzzled over his words, hand tight on the handle as he turned it. Halfway out of the door, he managed a, “maybe,” before he was gone, headed towards his desk so that he could get his things together that actually mattered. The highlighters he’d leave in his top desk drawer for Beverly because one of her many quirks was never having quite enough writing utensils to make her job just a little bit easier.

Todd in Marketing tried to stop him as he passed by his department, but Will didn’t stop for him. While his cocaine habit would remain a secret, there wasn’t much to be gained from someone like him anymore.

Beverly wasn’t there to witness him walk out of Tattler News for what he hoped to be the final time. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

Jack Crawford called.

Will Graham let it go to voicemail.

There was something oddly cathartic about it. He was pacing in his apartment, staring at the word doc. whose white screen glowed too bright in the muted light. It wasn’t blank anymore.
His watch beeped. Time to eat dinner.

He had time before he was supposed to meet Dr. Lecter at the office. Molly hadn’t yet called, and there was no word from Beverly, either. He thought to maybe call her, but he hesitated at actually reaching into his pocket to dial her number. He wondered if Abigail had told her she’d gotten fired. He wondered if there was something to her words about Beverly thinking Will was up to something.

He ultimately didn’t call her, much the same as he ultimately didn’t call Molly. His breath felt too big for his skin, pressed tight to the membrane as though he’d pop. His watch beeped again. He was supposed to be eating.

Rather than eat, he slept. As he slept, he dreamed.

- 

Dear Will,

I’ve followed your column from the beginning –Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, and Maestro all included.

Thing is, in following this from the beginning, with your jabs towards the Chesapeake Ripper and his jabs towards you, I think I’ve come to a conclusion:

You totally know who he is.

I’d say it was around the last few letters and your responses posted, but you totally know. There’s only so many times a person can say they are ‘supporting the FBI however they can’ yet you’re out there playing some kind of cat and mouse game. Don’t worry, I totally get it. You like the chase. You like to know.

I’d like for you to admit it in your paper, though. The people deserve to know you’ve blown this popsicle stand long ago and now you’re just toying with everyone. I suppose my question would be to ask you why. That feels like a cheap question, though. I wonder if you could even answer it honestly.

Thanks,

-A tentative fan, Nicole

- 

Will woke up ten minutes before he was supposed to leave. The drive there was spent quietly, fingers drumming on the steering wheel, the music crackling in tinny speakers. Bob Seager sang about rolling away.

The roads were bad, and he took curves slow as he meandered the drive to the good doctor’s office, all stone walls and bricks lining the hedges to prevent weeds. The walk had been salted, and the snow on the grass gleamed in the lamplight.

The secretary wasn’t there when Will stepped into the office, The air was warm, though, and Will hovered in the waiting room, removing his coat and gloves slowly. Something was fluttering in his chest, light and tingling.

His watch beeped: Meet with Dr. Lecter.
No one stepped out to greet him at 7:30, though, and Will watched the door just across from him, his breath not quite there.

Had Molly called Jack?

Had Beverly called Jack?

When he heard a soft, muted thud just on the other side, Will didn’t hesitate. He threw the door open, not quite sure if he was a breath away from throwing Hannibal Lecter under the bus or if he was coming to the rescue.

At the sight of Tobias Budge choking Hannibal with a piano wire, all thought of options and game plans fled entirely.

All that Will could see, in truth, was red.

Chapter End Notes

We're coming up on the last two chapters, guys...wow. This has been a ride! Delayed with work, personal life, and troubles, but we soldiered on! :)

Hope you're all having a great day! Fall is trying to settle into the Pacific Northwest, and I'm not vibing with it.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20:

Hannibal didn’t see things the way that many other people did.

He saw the way a mother’s hands shook as she fought to open her Xanax bottle, baby sleeping peacefully in the stroller. He saw the depression in the lines of a businessman’s face as he joked and laughed with colleagues during lunch. He saw the dips and sways of an alcoholic’s stumble, fumbling for car keys he’d pickpocketed off of them so that they couldn’t make a fool of themselves.

He often missed some of the tics and twitches of those considered normal; time gave him a better understanding of it, though, so that he could mimic and relate to them. He often missed the meaning behind things like ‘empathize with him,’ or ‘I can’t hurt him because I care too much.’ He tried to see those aspects of people, but oftentimes it was difficult to relate. He didn’t care much for most people. They were easy to dissect, a series of chemical responses in the brain that was first a primitive reaction, then something more nuanced.

Now, death was another matter. He didn’t particularly enjoy thinking of the first times he witnessed death; that was too raw and painful a thing to bear, so cruel and contradictory to everything Hannibal knew to be true about society and the strict rules of it. Time after such a jarring horror as that had given him enough understandings and skills with a scalpel to observe that societal rules were only as good as the people that kept them.

Despite all of this, death was one of Hannibal’s most favorite of things. He observed it as often as he could. Made notes of some of the most perfect of ways to consume people. Consumption was the only true way to understand, and Hannibal wished to understand everything that suited his fancy. One way or another.

One could partake in many, many ways, you see. Death was consumed through his hands, his knives. The taste, then, was victory laced with a good, strong bourbon. Sometimes, death was sipped through envious lips, savored like spices and mulled over. That paired with an aged merlot, and savored before a fire lit for ambiance.

Sometimes, death was all within the eyes, something so poignant and raw that it stayed deep within the recesses of Hannibal’s memory for long after, playing and replaying and replaying without ceasing. Those people were interesting to him, and he sought them out afterwards, to visit. In that moment, fighting Tobias Budge for his life, Hannibal seeing Will burst through his door oddly tasted like Coq Au Vin. He’d likely find a chardonnay to enjoy with it, something that left an oaken taste for long after on the tip of the tongue.
Seeing Tobias strangling Hannibal made something within Will’s expression shift, change. Hannibal noted the exact moment that Will Graham’s eyes seemed to almost fade; what took place instead was something he’d been waiting for, something he’d been hungry to see since that moment in the alleyway when the man that had appeared so weak and drunk suddenly looked otherwise.

Then, he charged.

Will was slighter than both Tobias and Hannibal, but he hit like a concrete wall and took them tumbling over the coffee table. The wire was loosened from Hannibal’s neck; he gulped in a breath and wriggled out from the tangle of limbs.

Things like pain were irrelevant when he had decided that something ought to be done about Tobias Budge. He took in another breath, mind racing rather than focus on the blood oozing from furious wounds. He’d hoped that Will would have pieced it together sooner rather than Tobias ultimately ambushing him in his own office – he’d wondered about maybe Will deciding to kill Tobias on his own. Fantasized, even.

Whatever his thoughts were, they were nothing compared to what he was currently witnessing. Somehow, the truth was all the better for Hannibal having not guessed it.

Will stood and dragged Tobias Budge to his feet, striking twice; his lip was a snarl as his knuckles broke flesh. Before Tobias could quite get his footing, Will struck once more, a rough slap to his ear, likely bursting the drum. Tobias howled, and Will grabbed him by the shoulders, throwing him back until he was stumbling towards the couch, grappling for the wire that’d slipped from his hands.

Will tackled him over the couch, snarling something in a guttural voice that Hannibal had only heard once from him before.

_Yes._

There was a scream, a stifled grunt. Something cracked, and someone sobbed.

Silence. What followed after was a decadent silence, and Hannibal tasted death once more. Quiet enough he heard the tremor of his breath, felt the humidity of the air on his cheeks.

It stayed like that for several minutes.

When the man stood up, Hannibal tracked his movements. He somehow looked bigger, stronger. Rather than the slouch and curved spine of a writer not used to much else but causing his own scoliosis and struggling for the perfect metaphor, he stood with a straight back and shoulders set, and the way that he spit Tobias Budge’s ear out of his mouth would stay with Hannibal long.
after, filed away within the many rooms of his memory palace to remember so long as he lived.

He stared at Hannibal, head tilted slightly as he considered him. Unwilling to break the quiet, sacred as it somehow was, Hannibal could only watch as the man picked his way over to him with careful deliberation, squatting down so that they were eye level, staring at one another. His eyes were flat, ungiving. Devoid of the sort of expressions that Will’s normally held.

“Dr. Lecter,” he said slowly. His voice was rough, the exact same tone that Hannibal had first heard so long ago, when he’d stood at the mouth of the alley and debated killing the rude man from the bar.

“And to whom do I owe the pleasure of speaking with?”

“I’m Francis. Francis Dolarhyde.”

“I’ve tried to meet you before, Francis,” Hannibal murmured. “I kept pushing his limits to see you.”

“I know.”

“You were disinterested?”

“Unnecessary.”

His tongue stuttered over his ‘S’s, and a scowl grooved deep into the lines on his face.

“Do you only take control when Will’s life is on the line?” Hannibal wondered.

“He lives, and I live. He wanted a protector, a Great Red Dragon. He got me.”

Hannibal pondered this, and he stood to his feet, brushing dust off of his suit jacket with care. In truth, his heart beat steadily, but it was a steady surety of just where he’d gotten after so much careful planning.

Things were going wonderfully well.

“How old are you, Francis?” Hannibal asked.

Francis tilted his head, crooked like a dragon might. A Great, Red Dragon. “I am beyond a realm of age. I exist as a weapon, a thing to be used. Age does not affect me as it does you.”
“How many times have you come out?”

Francis righted the chair that’d fallen over, and he sat down in it. Hannibal took the chair across from him, and he ignored the wretched sight of his toppled bookcases and the ripped painting, a favorite of his. It’d been gifted to him from Jack Crawford after careful insight to an interesting case of Existential Crisis.

“Once, after his dad died. Once, after a shitty home that fed us nothing but corn puffs and Mac N Cheese. Once, when some idiot tried to stab us. Once, when some idiot tried to slit you.”

Hannibal licked dry lips. He watched Francis track the motion, gaze alert to any movement. He was…flawed. His fake cleft palate that gave him a lisp, his enormous stature that seemed to take up so much more space. His movements were predatory, what Hannibal imagined a child would suppose a dragon to do when trapped within the skin of a man. A child, hurting. He wondered when Will had to dream of such protectors.

“How many people have you killed, Francis?”

Francis smiled, cold and cruel. “Three, now. I thought three before, but you said the addict’s alive.”

“He’s alive,” Hannibal agreed amiably. He considered Francis, stiff and as taut as a hair-trigger. “Did he create you to do the things that he was too afraid to do?”

“No,” Francis said slowly. His brow drew down, and he stared off to the corner.

“Do you suppose –”

“Are you going to try and kill us, Dr. Lecter?” Francis asked, and he glanced back to Hannibal. Hannibal thought to maybe wet his throat with a glass of water, but it was just across the room to his desk. The thought of moving, of breaking the spell of conversation around them with something so petty as needing a drink, was appalling. Hannibal held just as still as the man across from him, more than aware of the line they were walking, toeing the whisper between life and death.

“Is it you or Will that entertains the worry? Or is it a shared thing?”

“Apart from his mental space, we don’t share much at all.”

“Then it is your worry?”
Francis shook his head, but it was an uncertain motion. “I’m a better killer than you,” he said. “They’d never find the body.”

“Do you suppose I’d mount you in some grotesque fashion?” Hannibal wanted to laugh, but he held in the impulse. He didn’t suppose Francis shared the same dark humor as Will did. “I wonder if you’d think of it as beautiful, if you could be around to see it after.”

“You’d elevate him,” Francis said after some thought. “He’d appreciate it, but that is because he is foolish.”

“Not you, though,” Hannibal observed.

“While he wondered at your metaphors, I’d wonder at our death.”

“Then you are his practicality?”

“I am his violence.”

Hannibal couldn’t resist, drawn as he was to the way Will’s face looked absolutely nothing like Will’s face. It was him, but somehow not, some form that was altogether different and wholly interesting. “And what am I to him?”

“I think you’re a puzzle to him. But he’s finally figured it out. Do you think you’ll be special then, Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal had wondered much the same, in the short time he’d studied Will Graham. Would Will Graham still be interesting after he’d peeled back every layer and devoured every inch of his inspiration? After he consumed his words, his spirit, his soul, would he still continue to inspire, to ignite some sense of purpose within him that’d first even provoked Hannibal to begin this wildly spontaneous dance with the public world and the FBI?

“Do you hold his darkness in, Francis?” Hannibal questioned. “Or do you let it spread, relentless, encompassing everything like an oil spill?”

“His darkness is his own,” Francis hissed, leaning in. “I am merely the fist behind his wrath. I do what he will not because he will not Become that sort of person. The killer.”

“But he already has,” Hannibal reminded him. He softened his voice. “In making you, however long ago it was that he did, he put his wrath within you and let you kill for him. Whether his own hand, or the hand of you, both of you coincide within Will Graham. You are the same. Perhaps his subconscious is cruel to him because of that, because some part of him is well aware of the capacity he has for violence, considering however long ago it was that his trauma created you to
be violent for him.”

Francis held still, as if poised to strike.

“He made some part of himself able to live with the idea of having taken a life,” Hannibal realized. “Because he knows his empathy would destroy him at the thought. But not…but not you.”

“I carry what he cannot,” he snarled.

“His cruelty,” Hannibal realized, delighted. “You carry his cruelty, therefore he can acknowledge his violence without having to entirely touch it.”

Some part of Francis contorted, shifted, at that, and he let out a snarl, horrible and fierce before he looked back to Hannibal, livid. Livid, and yet…tired. Something in him was fading, fading, and Hannibal could only witness, enraptured.

He did not let out a great bellow; Francis Dolarhyde slipped into an unconscious state quietly, with the sort of dignity Hannibal hadn’t necessarily expected. After some thought, he conceded that perhaps it could be expected. A Great, Red Dragon wouldn’t cause such a scene as to scream and roar as they faded back into themselves. Perhaps a snarl, something small and dangerous. It was a tantalizing thought.

Hannibal sat poised just on the edge of the leather chair across from Will Graham for some time, thinking. With each new thought, a new door appeared within his mind palace, the place in which he locked away all precious thoughts he’d surely regret losing.

Will woke with the sloppy crashing of waves of consciousness. They crested over him, relentless, then caved away beneath his resistance. Something inside of him wanted to sleep, to push away the persistent urges to open his eyes, open his eyes, open his eyes…

He opened his eyes and sat up, dismayed, within Hannibal Lecter’s study.

“You have two suitcases currently taking up space within a derelict automobile,” Lecter said, strolling into the office. “Were you planning on running away with me, Will?”

Will stiffened, and he took careful stock of the office around him, muscles taut. Everything was in a horrific disarray, the coffee table decimated as though someone had tackled it to the floor. Books were scattered from where a bookcase had toppled over, and one of the stands that’d housed a brass sculpture was broken on the dented floor. Real brass, then. Real brass, a real dent, and Will quite suddenly had a very real problem.

“What happened?” he asked.
“Tobias Budge happened,” Hannibal said gravely.

Will didn’t see Tobias Budge, nor did he see any evidence necessarily of him having been there – a break-in? His mind leapt, dizzied, and he felt somehow drunk from it, like he’d consumed a lot of whiskey in a short amount of time. He looked around, then had to lean back in his chair to stave off of a rush of vertigo so strong he wondered if he’d vomit.

A break in because…

“He was the Maestro,” Will realized. He looked to Hannibal who was currently burning something in the fireplace – it took much too long for Will to realize that that’s exactly what he was doing – and continued, “you and your damn favor…”

Do you think he’s going to escalate his crimes if you don’t give him the attention he’s seeking?

“It’s a gift,” Hannibal said, and he turned back to the fireplace.

“A gift,” Will scoffed. Once his legs felt sturdy under him, he stood and walked over to watch him burn what appear to be a stack of files. The corner of the one on top read ‘Brown, Ha—’

“Yes, a gift. I thought to give it to Jack Crawford, since he surely would be too overcome to try and hunt two serial killers as opposed to one. A gift to you, as well, if you want to see it that way.”

Hannibal glanced to Will out of the corner of his eye, and his lip quirked ever-so-slightly.

“And am I the one giving him the gift when he takes me to the safehouse?” Will wondered. Somewhat of a joke, somewhat of a test. He was more than aware of the heat just in front of him from the fire that slowly grew with each stack of files, but he was also hyper-aware of the heat just beside him, close enough to lean into, close enough to touch. Something was stirring inside of him, seeing the file and the name curling and greying to ash. Although tired, aching like after a particularly violent fight, his mind was jumping, quick bursts as he began to see more and more of the room: the suitcase by the door, the purposeful care of all of the books on what shelves left standing turned around the wrong way, and the empty spaces where surely important books and documents used to be.

His throat was parched. His watch, surprisingly, didn’t beep to remind him to drink water. He wondered if some part of him was dreaming, but no; he was very much awake.

“Only if you want to be,” Hannibal replied. He tossed the next stack of files into the fire, and he smiled wanly. “Your prints are everywhere, here. You could carry the story of your survival, as
well as an eye witness account right to Crawford’s lap. You’d be a hero doing something like that.”

“Jack can’t wear his wedding band again until he finds you,” said Will, and he thought of the stripe of paler skin, how it stood out so much now that Will knew the truth of it.

“I wonder if that makes you more curious than concerned,” Hannibal said, and he turned to face Will squarely, hands clasped behind his back. “You who only engaged with me because you wanted to have fun.”

“No,” Will rebuked kindly, and something was twisting just behind the thickness and density of his ribs. He wondered if Molly had gotten the letter yet, or if Beverly had, too; he wondered if right now Freddie was cursing him as they went over the edits for his final words to the column ‘Will Intentions,’ or if Charlie was thinking of ways to attempt to entice him back to Tattler News. He wondered if Abigail was panicking yet, if she was waiting for a sign or a call that could never come because Will was many things, but cruelty towards the innocent wasn’t one of his strong suits. “You said you wanted to be my friend,” Will reminded him, looking over to him.

Hannibal smiled, and it made his eyes shine bright in the firelight. It transformed his face, made him appear less predatory than he ever had before. “I did.”

“I am missing gaps of my memory,” Will said, tracking the movements of his face.

“Oh?”

Hannibal’s expression didn’t shift the slightest. Will smiled, and maybe it was the disarming way in which it felt utterly genuine despite what they were doing, the things they were saying, Hannibal’s perfectly calm poker face remained perfectly calm, but something about it felt all of a sudden rather rehearsed, like he’d had to think on it for awhile before settling on expression such as that.

“Can I trust you, Hannibal?” he asked. It felt dangerous, saying it like that.

“Such a question poses its own challenges, don’t you think?” Hannibal replied. His expression remained the same.

“Because I’m trusting you to honestly tell me whether or not you’re trustworthy.”

“Yes, that.”

Silence, save the devouring of perfectly flammable paper. Will licked his lips and tried again. “I’d like for you to read something later,” he said, looking back to the fire. “I think I’ve gotten it into its final editing stage.”
“A bout of inspiration?” Hannibal asked, and somehow he was much closer than before. Will kept staring at the fire, and suddenly he wasn’t thinking of Beverly or Molly or Freddie or even Abigail, confused and probably scared as she was. He wasn’t even thinking of their dance with words, how somehow they could share so much yet standing side-by-side now Will wasn’t quite sure where to even begin.

“Yes.”

“Are serial killers your muse, Mr. Graham?” Hannibal wondered, and he lifted a hand just close enough to ghost along his shirt. It brushed just shy of his throat, and he shifted close enough that Will could smell the scent of his cologne, something oaky and expensive.

“…Yes,” Will replied, and it sounded an awful lot like a confession. When he turned to Hannibal, he was surprised at the lack of space between them, intimate.

“You wouldn’t know, but I waited by the clock tower each day waiting to see how long it took for you to arrive,” Hannibal revealed. It was honest, genuine, and it somehow balanced Will’s confession with his candor. “I worried perhaps I’d misunderstood you completely. I wondered if you were so clever.”

“Someone like you would more than likely enjoy building walls up to see if someone is clever enough to either tear them down or climb over them,” Will scoffed, but it was light. He felt oddly…light.

“Then I assume you have another letter to write, for Jack Crawford,” Hannibal decided, and he dipped down and put his mouth remarkably close to Will’s. “As you’ll only continue to have inspiration for your works by coming along with me.”

Will held his breath, and he nodded. He grabbed the bastard by the curve of his lapels, and he hauled him in , thinking of the way he’d held him in the dark at the gala, the heat of his body as he whispered ugly things in his ear.

“You’ll tell me what I’ve forgotten and why,” he warned Hannibal, soft enough he wondered if he’d even spoke. “After our more pressing situation is over. You’ll tell me.”

That close, Hannibal looked mildly amusing; his eyes crossed slightly as he looked at Will’s mouth so that they were staring one another in the eye, the most direct eye contact they’d held since the moment when Hannibal first sent him a letter asking if he had wanted to play a game.

“Then we have a deal,” Hannibal murmured, and he closed the distance between them, arms wrapped tight around Will’s waist.
His mouth made Will think of things much like warm hands, cool Spring mornings, and sealing a deal with the devil by the giving of a kiss.

Beverly Katz cornered them at the Texaco twenty miles out of Baltimore where they were gassing up at the farthest back pump. She had a gun on them, and it’d never occurred to Will that Beverly would have ever hunted him down with a gun.

Let alone hunted him down at all.

“You know, I wondered the last time we talked that you were maybe going to do something irrational,” Beverly said conversationally, poised at the back of their sedan. They’d stolen it – Hannibal had stolen it. Will had wondered over the theft, the desperate and afraid person stuck finding the empty parking spot the next morning, and the large but revealing furry head set with care in the back seat.

“Beverly –”

“Then, I thought, ‘he’s not that stupid’,” she continued. Despite her blasé tone, her arms were stiff and unyielding as she kept the gun poised on Hannibal.

Hannibal, for everything, had all appearances of a mildly unrumpled and wholly bemused individual. He took her lack of shooting him immediately in great stride, and he seemed content, when Will looked at him, to allow him to continue reaching out to her.

“How’d you find me?”

“I’ve been following you around since the night after the gala!” Beverly snapped, and her mouth thinned to a flat, crooked line across the bottom of her face. It was her favorite feature, she’d once boasted. A crooked smile. Made all the boys at the bar nervous.

Will went very, very still.

“Yeah,” she said, and her eyes darkened. Will supposed that most of the trouble –should he live through the encounter –would be the fact that he’d be stuck remembering that expression for as long as he lived. “Yeah, I know that you broke into his house. I know you knew about this long, long before all of your bull shit excuses.”

She may have been a writer, but confrontation wasn’t necessarily Beverly’s forte. Like Will, left in the aftermath of her reveal, the punch in the gut that left him suddenly guessing everything took far too much for him to recover from. She stared at him, Will stared back. He sucked in a breath and thought of the night he’d first asked her to come along, when he’d treated himself to top shelf liquor and she’d promised to help him kick Freddie Lounds’ ass.
“We need to kill her,” Hannibal said lightly, just beside Will.

“No.”

The fact that Will spoke at the same time as Beverly didn’t soften her to him. Her glare was fixed between the two of them, switching periodically as her suspicion rose and lowered respectively.

“You have a letter waiting for you at home,” Will said.

“Oh, is that why you don’t want to kill me?”

“He’s spared your life before, you know,” Hannibal interjected. “At the gala, he informed me that you were not part of our game.”

“Funny, I’m feeling a bit played here, Will,” Beverly said pointedly.

“Did you see the blood on my shirt?” Will asked.

Beverly smiled thinly. It somehow didn’t suit her. “You think you can hide a stain like that? The moment you sat down in the car, I saw some of it. You’ve been lying to me for a long time, Will.”

Will nodded slowly. Something was scalding hot on his tongue, and it felt an awful lot like a confession. “I just didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“You are sometimes so full of shit,” Beverly hissed. “You think I haven’t called the cops and the FBI? Do you think friendship is keeping you alive right now?”

“Beverly –”

“You’ll lower your gun, or you’ll have to take a nap,” a familiar man said, and Will stared, gaping in awe as the homeless man from the alleyway strolled up behind Beverly with a pistol cocked lazily at his hip. “And I don’t mean the cat-kind.”

Abigail Hobbs skirted around him, although if she had a gun Will couldn’t quite see. She was determined not to look at Will, it seemed, as she stationed herself just behind Hannibal, luggage bag at her side. “I thought I’d stalled her long enough,” she groused.

“That wasn’t funny,” Beverly said, turning her head to glance back at the homeless man. She
lowered her gun to the ground and lifted her hands out to the side.

“You’re not shooting her,” Will said, although he couldn’t be sure if he was saying that to Hannibal or to the man behind her. “She’s going home unharmed.”

“Fuck you, Will,” Beverly snarled.

“I didn’t entirely fuck you over, you know,” Will replied, and he motioned back towards the city and where she likely had a very important package waiting at the house. “Go home, Beverly. Your front page awaits you.”

There was something chilling in the way she didn’t break eye contact, even as she backed up just enough to skirt around the homeless man. She climbed into her car, and maybe the pistol hadn’t been a personal token to her because she didn’t try to negotiate for it. Will stooped down, picked it up, and checked the safety.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he said hollowly, and he jabbed towards Hannibal hollowly. “You’ve got some fucking explaining to do.”

“Fuck you,” the homeless man said cheerfully.

Chapter End Notes

So maybe it's fitting that I'm updating this a day before my birthday --like a birthday gift to myself that I can update things every now and then, haha.

And really, after a chapter like this...I'm not sure quite what to comment down here? The last few times I've dropped some bombs on y'all, I said something to the effect of 'Well...that happened.'

So...well, that happened. :) I hope you enjoyed.

Song Inspiration: The Devil Wears a Suit and Tie
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 21:

Molly Foster, ex-girlfriend of Will Graham, showed up at the FBI at approximately 8:00 A.M. the next morning with pink cheeks, shaking hands, curses spewing from her mouth, and a package containing some twice-frozen and questionably sourced meat.

She was frisked and quickly escorted to the interrogation room, after which she was subject to a surly, uncomfortable stare from a grizzly and entirely too angry FBI agent.

She stared back, just as furious – the person she was angry with was currently MIA and in no position to be yelled at.

Dear Molly,

I know that at this moment, you’re likely regretting that we ever crossed paths a second time. You’re more than likely wondering why you didn’t utilize your vocabulary to tell me just where I should shove my head before hanging up that night, and with the trip you’re going to have to take to the FBI after reading this, it’s only going to get worse from here.

I could say that I didn’t mean for things to happen this way, and it’d be an honest statement. In a million years, I never imagined myself this way, neither the circumstances that led me here or the people that crossed my path. In truth, you were a bout of normalcy that kept everything grounded for me, and I won’t forget how that indebts me to you in a monumental way.

Unfortunately, circumstances are such that I’m going to have to ask you to do something for me because Jack Crawford has ensured I won’t have the time to do it myself.

The file on the table is everything necessary to prove that Dr. Hannibal Lecter is guilty of murder, torture, and cannibalism. Weirdly enough, cannibalism isn’t illegal, but he’s going to need an explanation about how you managed to have access to human meat, let alone the paperwork incriminating it as such. If you could take the file, its contents, and the packages of meat to him and inform him of my ‘Investigative Journalism’, I’d greatly appreciate it.

He’s going to ask if I coached you or why he should have any reason to trust you. Ask if him he’s received any mail yet, and if not to have someone check the mailroom. That should be all that is necessary to absolve an innocent person of the not-so-criminal crime of being the messenger. He may even give you a reprieve and run off to check for himself.

If you happen to hate me for this, I understand. The first time we found one another, I was in a place mentally where I was not the support you deserved. Now, I know myself much better, and you honestly deserve someone far better than what I’ve become.

I wish you the best,

-Will Graham

“Why should I trust that you aren’t part of this hair-brained bull shit?” Jack asked.
Molly stared back at him, unruffled but certainly rumpled. Will Graham’s letter—Will Graham, in truth—was a bruise she wanted to keep pressing down on until the hideous colors gave way beneath the pressure of her anger. Each time she thought on him, though, it was as though she was getting punched in the gut all over again. Beverly had tried to warn her.

*Beverly, of all people…*

“Have you gotten any mail?” she asked—not skeptical, but certainly unhappy about the ordeal of it.

The look leveled at her after said that yes, yes he had gotten a letter. Molly smiled, but it wasn’t entirely pleasant. Hard to be, considering.

“I’m sure there are a thousand things you want to ask, and a thousand things you want to know. I will answer to the best of my ability, but realistically, you know this Will Graham better than I do.”

“This Will Graham?”

She scoffed politely. “Agent Crawford, you’ve been interacting with him a hell of a lot longer than I’ve been dating him. You tell me if you think there’s really only one side to Will Graham.”

Jack Crawford took some time to silently deliberate, fingers casually turning a pen around and around and around in a circle on the table. It seemed to be a forced calm, though, because when he came to a decision he stopped spinning it. He pressed his palms flat to the table and leaned in, voice dropped low as though he were giving a secret. Weirdly, the only thing Molly could focus on was a thin stripe of skin on his ring finger from a freshly removed ring.

“Last night, at approximately nine-thirty P.M., Will Graham was seen fleeing Baltimore, Maryland, with Dr. Hannibal Lecter, Abigail Hobbs, and an unknown suspect,” he revealed, and her reaction must have been genuine enough because he leaned back in his chair, satisfied.

“What…what is in that letter, Agent Crawford?” Molly asked, looking from his bare ring finger to his chestnut colored eyes. “What’d he send you?”

And the silence that followed, deafening in the morose and drab interrogation room, was just heavy enough that Molly figured she may have to take Will Graham up on his offer of hating him for just a little longer.

-  

**Dear Beverly,**

*Enclosed you will find everything you need to write an extended expose on Will Graham and the Chesapeake Ripper. By now, I’m sure you’re well aware of more than enough to think I’m the villain I’ve been writing about this entire time.*

*Moreover, I’ve likely ruined a very good friendship.*

*We first met and bonded through our writing. I always joked with you that you would have more of a knack for the field than I, playing politics and rubbing shoulders with the ultimately varied and stifling journalist types. I promised once over drinks we’d kick Freddie Lounds off of the front page and get you onto it.*
Even with everything else that’s happened, I believe I have just what you need in order to fulfill our promise. Even if you hate me for it.

Thank you,

-Will Graham

Dear Will,

I’ve followed your column from the beginning –Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, and Maestro all included.

Thing is, in following this from the beginning, with your jabs towards the Chesapeake Ripper and his jabs towards you, I think I’ve come to a conclusion:

You totally know who he is.

I’d say it was around the last few letters and your responses posted, but you totally know. There’s only so many times a person can say they are ‘supporting the FBI however they can’ yet you’re out there playing some kind of cat and mouse game. Don’t worry, I totally get it. You like the chase. You like to know.

I’d like for you to admit it in your paper, though. The people deserve to know you’ve blown this popsicle stand long ago and now you’re just toying with everyone. I suppose my question would be to ask you why. That feels like a cheap question, though. I wonder if you could even answer it honestly.

Thanks,

-A tentative fan, Nicole

Dear Nicole,

You’re right.

Sincerely,

-Will Graham

It wasn’t until they were safely tucked away in a ramshackle motel that reeked of lemon pledge and soured water that Will and Hannibal were able to speak.

It wasn’t so much that they couldn’t have spoken, before; it was more that Will first had to stew in his thoughts, each one connecting more and more of the threads that’d apparently been woven behind him when he wasn’t looking. That Abigail had first been found by Hannibal made sense. If he was working with Jack Crawford at the time of Abigail’s apprehension, then it was likely he’d see it as the perfect opportunity to get to know her more—and in turn, maybe he saw more of Will?

The homeless man, though…

“I stabbed you, once,” Will had said to the man as they drove in an uncomfortable silence.
Hannibal sat in regal repose in the back, eyes fixed to the evening traffic. They needed busier areas to disappear, he’d reasoned. Everyone ran to the isolated, empty spaces to hide, but didn’t anyone know that those were the most obvious places to look?

“You did.” the man agreed. “Ugly fuckin’ scar, too.”

Will glanced to Abigail in the rearview, knees to her chest and arms locked tight around them, then back to the road in front of him. There was an unopened Gatorade at his feet—courtesy of the original owner of the vehicle. He thought about opening it, just to have something to do with his hands.

He thought to say more, but nothing else came. He watched road signs, tapped his fingers on his left knee with every bump in the road that he felt through his seat, and he waited.

The man checked them into the motel, then circled the car around hours later. After they were settled, two rooms conjoined through a door in the center, Will sat down in a ratty, suspiciously damp chair and stared at the man just across from him.

Hannibal smiled warmly and stared right back.

“You healed him,” Will said, nodding towards the door.

“You can’t blame me for being curious,” said Hannibal. He sat perfectly poised on the edge of the bed. His eyes, deep-set, looked almost black in the dim and shoddy lighting. For fifty bucks for both rooms, they’d take what they could get.

“I don’t.”

“Abigail first recognized me, not the other way around,” he continued, just as calm. “She was curious about you, and I supposed it’d be far better for you to see her after she had had time to allow the shock and the first moments of pain to ease. She watched him die.”

Will nodded in agreement. He thought of Abigail purposefully avoiding his look as she’d walked around him. She’d used Hannibal as a shield.

It was fair, though; he hadn’t called like he promised.

“His name is Mike,” Hannibal said. “He didn’t have anywhere to go to, so I decided to hire him for odd jobs. He was thankful for the help, and I thought it a fun sort of irony. Does it bother you?”

“I don’t remember killing him,” he said. A beat, then, “and I don’t remember Budge dying, either.”

His stare was pointed. The horror of the blood staining his bedsheets the next morning was printed onto his eyes.

And maybe it was the way that the humor in Hannibal’s eyes faded somewhat, something keen and lethal flickering in instead, but Will found himself sitting up straighter and tracking Hannibal’s steps as he took the care to sit down across from him.

“You wouldn’t,” he said gravely.

And that is how Will Graham came to know just the sort of deadly capabilities he truly had at his disposal.
Dear Will,

Sometimes, I have thoughts about what it’d be like to stab someone. To hurt someone. I know that everyone has passing thoughts like that, but mine are not-so passing and not-so few and far between. I have tried to see therapists about it, but either they offer me a cocktail of 8,000 pills to take, or they tell me that I am simply not working hard enough at getting rid of the thoughts.

In reality, your writing spoke to me on a personal level. I feel that you also have a certain duality to your tone, where you have such a special understanding of these people yet can objectively see just how wrong their actions are. You understand them but do not condone their actions. I suppose my questions is: how do you live within your own mind when it has such contrasting thoughts and ideas? When there are some parts of you that are so dark as to empathize with murderers and psychopaths?

Hopefully,

Hungry

Dear Hungry,

I believe that there are a number of people that live within a certain sort of duality. People are fluid enough that no one person is ever the same over an extended period of time. We put on faces for our bosses. We put on faces for our peers, our friends. In a way, we all put on some form of performance for those whose eyes are on us, whether we realize it or not.

It’s said that the only time you are truly yourself is when you’re alone – for people like you and me, Hungry, that is not always the case. For me, hyper-empathy is something that makes it oftentimes difficult for others to see when I am being myself and when I am being someone else. Although I am always able to tell, it does not mean that it’s in my control to change it. Sometimes, my mannerisms pick up aspects of someone else, and try as I might it’s as easy as breathing – effortless. For you, it seems as though you are afraid to be alone with yourself, lost in your own head where you think of things you know that you shouldn’t.

And yet, it is because I thought of such things that I shouldn’t have that I ended up writing for ‘Will Intentions’ in the first place.

My advice to you would be to accept your darker thoughts. That doesn’t mean to take a knife to the nearest person that gives you a hard time, but understand that this is something that isn’t going away. Understand that there is nothing wrong with embracing all aspects of yourself, not just the parts that society deems acceptable.

I think that through this journey, Hungry, I have come to be at peace with my darker side. I was once asked if serial killers were my muse, seeing as how I am so prolific at writing about them. While that once itched at me, made me wonder at myself, now I see.

At long last, I now can finally see.

Best wishes,

Will
“They say to write what you know,” Will said, much later. “But it’s difficult to write what you can never remember.”

He was laying on his back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. The irony of it wasn’t lost on Will, his repose while Hannibal sat in the chair he’d occupied for the better part of an hour. Patient-therapist, at last.

Will had asked him to recount the events leading to Tobias’ murder. His hands didn’t feel any different, the longer he’d stared at them. Will reasoned that despite their precarious position—they were now on the run, after all—they had the time to at least talk about it. They were here just long enough for the driver to sleep, then they’d be off when he knocked on the door.

A plan, Hannibal had assured him, was already in order.

“What do you remember?” Hannibal asked.

“I remember…my dad. When I was very young, I remember him. We’d fish together, but sometimes he had to help me reel them in.”

“And your mother?”

Will shook his head and stared at the ceiling. The watch wasn’t beeping; he didn’t set reminders when it was time to sleep, lest he wake up and ruin his sleep schedule. He thought to charge it, but the urge felt half-hearted at best.

“She left is what I recall…we had to move a lot. Finally, child services decided we moved too much for a kid my age, and we were poor.” His face scrunched, and he tasted something bitter. “I think that’s…that’s why I was taken. But I didn’t see a difference in foster care. I was better taken care of with my dad, even when we had to live out of a car.”

“I’d wondered that, you know,” said Hannibal. He took a sip of coffee—when had he made it? While Will sat in silent shock coupled with a sense of fury at this invasion in his skin, this feeling that there was some part of him that he wasn’t even aware existed? Some part of himself that knew him in a way that he’d never know them?

“What?”

“You would mention your past very rarely, but you’d told Abigail one story, you’d told me another, and you’d told Agent Crawford the other. I thought perhaps there was something pathological to your lying, but now I know otherwise. You piece together your past and say what little you do know.”

Will’s lips felt fat, ungiving as he tried to push the words out. He continued to stare at the ceiling and counted the spidery cracks in the corners. They pushed against his teeth. His teeth pushed back, and he forced his mouth to open.

“Did you think maybe putting me in front of that man would jog some sort of memory?” he rasped.

“I wasn’t sure what it’d do, but I was curious,” Hannibal admitted. “It seemed an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.”

Will wanted to be mad about that, but it was difficult to.
“I don’t remember most of my teenage years. Off and on, I’d…not even remember why I was in another foster home, just that I was. I think I was…I was seventeen, and that family ran on a military schedule. He took one look at me, and this Master Sergeant for the Marine Corps said ‘You never had to have structure to make you behave. In this house, you’ll be so structured you know the right second in which to take a bite of food.’ Everything was scheduled. Everything.”

“You were a troublesome child?”

Will nodded.

“But you can’t remember some of the troubles,” he clarified.

“I remember that the first home I was ever put into had six other kids, and an older one took a liking to me. He tried to make me stay in his room with him all the time, and he wanted to share beds. I was seven…or eight. Maybe eight.”

He kinked his neck in order to look at Hannibal properly. Something about the expression on his face made it difficult to feel defensive about the intrusion into his life. Maybe because it seemed…genuine? His eyes were somehow softer, despite their precarious position. Was Beverly right? Did they currently have the FBI right on their ass, or was she only bluffing? They had a few hours on them, but what was a few when they were on the run?

What was a paltry, squalid few hours when one was abetting a serial killer?

“Do you remember much of that home?”

Spit pooled onto his tongue so quickly Will thought he was going to vomit; his heart thudded into his eyes, and he stared up to the ceiling pointedly, willing the churning in his stomach to ease, to abate. He thought of The Ripper’s gift, how it’d toppled onto him in front of Tobias Budge.

Tobias Budge, whom he had just killed.

“Did you expect Budge to be at the Zoo when I found your ‘gift’?” he asked.

Hannibal silently acquiesced to the changing of the subject with an incline of his chin. Despite the hollowed curve of his cheek that gave him such a savage expression, his smile was gentle.

“I think that’s what the young kids would call a ‘dick move’,,” Will continued ruthlessly.

“I believe most of our interactions would be summarized in such a way if one didn’t think to pull back the layers,” Hannibal replied with a laugh. “Did you truly only begin dating Molly Foster in order to get her to run tests on the meat that you stole from me? Was confirmation so important to you?”

And that was when it was Will’s turn to smile, something bittersweet like biting into dark chocolate with the surprise of caramel inside.

“I know that you have a plan, Hannibal,” he said, suddenly sitting up. His hands didn’t look like murderer’s hands, but then again neither did Hannibal’s. He wondered if he looked to the grooves in his palms, he’d see the person inside capable of snapping a man’s neck. “But I’ve got a few things rolling that you need to know about.”

“Yes, you’d mentioned something to Beverly that made me curious,” Hannibal agreed.
“Maybe we should figure out just how my plan and yours come together.” A beat. “I don’t think I’m going to get any sleep anyway.”

Hannibal’s smile was all teeth. “I like the sound of that.”

- 

Sometime in the night, Will was woken by the sound of two firm thuds on the door between the two rooms. His chest was pressed taut to Hannibal’s back, arm draped carelessly over his hip. Something about it was intimate, his knowing of just how close he pressed while Hannibal slept. He stared down at the peaceful repose of the person that’d gleefully recounted when Tobias had first burst into his office, marveled at the skin turned marble in the faint glow from the bathroom light. He wanted to touch it; he reasoned he shouldn’t.

When he turned to get out of bed and get their things together, though, he was surprised when Hannibal’s eyes opened, clear as a spring day. They stared at one another, too close and too intimate with their ruffled hair and their bad breath from sleep.

When Hannibal leaned up to kiss Will, Will let him. It took another minute or so before they got out of bed to escape into the night.

- 

*Breaking News: Will Graham Missing in Conjunction with Chesapeake Ripper’s Disappearance*

*Where is Will Graham? A Special News Release*

*Chesapeake Ripper Revealed in Tattler News’ ‘Will Intentions’*

*Hannibal ‘The Cannibal’ Lecter Wanted for Murder*

*Where is Hannibal Lecter?*

*Where is Will Graham?*

*Will Graham Leaves Tattler News: The Chesapeake Ripper’s Muse?*

*Will Graham and Chesapeake Ripper: Behind the Scenes of the Chase*

Beverly had her exposé written, edited, and sent to Charlie at approximately the same time that Molly Foster was sitting in an interrogation room at the FBI. She’d have liked to have said that when she returned home, still shaking after having a man that looked very much like the homeless man that lived outside of Tattler News hold a gun to her, she immediately called the FBI and turned in all of the paperwork and information that sat in an expedited shipping package on her kitchen table, but she didn’t.

No, she arrived at the FBI at about the time that Molly Foster was leaving it, none-the-wiser for the other having been involved.

That, coupled with her own notes and documentations in seeing the Will Graham that no one else seemed able to see, after she’d signed her official statements and given Jack Crawford everything that she could, she got a call from Charlie. Somehow, the timing was perfect. Everything was falling, and yet they seemed to be falling into their special, respective places.

Almost like a plan.
She’d have to hate Will Graham, just on principal of what he was doing and just who he was running away with.

“Katz, I want this on the front page. This shit is gold. You coming in today? Are you coming in? That fucking piece of shit Graham, you need to come see what I had to print today, you gotta come see this.”

But maybe, just for a little while, she wouldn’t join the mob likely stirring, hands full of pitchforks, torches, and stacks of newspaper clippings. Maybe she owed Will Graham that much.

- 

Dear Will,

As an Avid Fan, I know you have to answer a lot of questions regarding the Chesapeake Ripper and defend yourself on several accounts. I’ve still been a fan, even with some of your choices that I haven’t personally agreed with. Not only have I followed your column, I’ve been eager to see what others say, since you as a person don’t find any interest in social media, and the only press conference you took part in seemed to almost physically hurt you.

Mostly, I’m wondering what’s next for you? Do you think they’ll catch the Chesapeake Ripper? Do you think that if he’s caught you’ll be able to continue on with the column the same way? Do you have any goals, any dreams? For someone so prominent in the writing world overnight, I’m sure there’s more you want to share with the world.

#anavidfanbutnotTHATavidfan

Dear #anavidfan,

I never thought myself one for adventure or intrigue, but then again I couldn’t say that I was necessarily happy in my one-bedroom apartment with leaky faucets and aged, water-stained walls. I probably wouldn’t have suffered through wedding announcements for the rest of my life, but I was satisfied enough with paying my bills and going through the motions. I had a schedule. I stuck to it.

Sometimes, the motions that be won’t let you relax, though. They won’t allow you to be satisfied with wallowing in your own mediocrity.

I have placed my two-weeks’ notice into the hands of my boss, and I’ve only answered three questions for the paper so that they can’t pick and choose which ones they post.

You see, #anavidfan, I am terming my position with Tattler News in order to hunt bigger sharks. Sharks, much like the Chesapeake Ripper. Sharks, much like the one that the FBI is likely hunting down as you read this because I decided to drop off my information regarding their hunt for the Chesapeake Ripper, and it seems that once again I’ve done their job for them.

You see, #avidfan, the Chesapeake Ripper is none other than Dr. Hannibal Lecter, psychiatrist and occasional consultant for the FBI.

I don’t like to think that this is the end, though. There are always other killers to find, other stories to tell. Writing and writers go hand-in-hand, and even when the words don’t quite flow as you like; when words fall short or descriptions seem lackluster, still we chase that dream that our words will one day change things. We can only hope that one day our words can change someone the way that another’s words have changed us.
So to you, and to everyone else that has followed this journey with me:

What is your muse?

-Will Graham

Chapter End Notes

Well, we've got one chapter left, and maybe an epilogue depending on how carried away I get :) Thank you all so very, very much for going on this journey with me. This has been such a fun, pleasant ride! This Will has been maybe sassier than others, and much darker. It has been a fun challenge!
Chapter 22:

When Tattler News released the ‘Special Edition’ of ‘Will Intentions’, Nicole pinned her copy to a corkboard much like Will’s. She’d already snuck into his apartment, taken photos, and recreated something of his workspace within her own office, to better step into the shoes of what his fans were calling ‘a vigilante move’.

To partner with the Tattler News release, she’d also released a special post on her blog with a ‘tell all’ interview courtesy of Freddie Lounds, coworker and ‘close friend’ of Graham. She’d already received four more subscriptions, as well as twenty new messages in her inbox, thanking her for her hard work.

*I saved an image of the handkerchief!* someone had commented. *I’ll try to find one like it at the store. Maybe I’ll cosplay it.*

Lounds had asked to see the handkerchief Nicole had mentioned, but it was never revealed in person. The look on Lounds’ face when she was told ‘no’ made Nicole more than grateful she’d put a lock on her jewelry box before the reporter had shown up.

As for her end of the bargain, she’d passed his manuscript along to her agent. Anything more, and she’d have her own story about uneasy trips to the FBI to tell her readers.

--

Abigail didn’t speak to Will until they were somewhere in Vancouver, BC. She spent most of the trip with her earphones in her ears and her head towards the window. Given the time, Will didn’t press her. It seemed she’d been playing a game with him for almost as long as he’d been playing a game with Hannibal.

And yet, no; *what game do you think you’re all playing?*

The border situation had been tricky, but the homeless man –Mike, Will kept having to remind himself –was more than true to his word at getting them across. Once across, it was the sort of drive done by someone who had a very important place to go with little time to get there. They stopped for gas and nothing else. The next couple of days was nothing but yoo-hoo’s and donuts, Will’s dreams bleeding into the waking hours of watching hill after hill of white pass by. Blankets of it draped along the interstate, but the plows had done their job. If their car appeared suspicious, no one stopped them. The more they kept to normal hours of traffic where it was difficult for cops to keep an eye out, the better. Hannibal remained in the backseat and only got out when absolutely necessary.

“I’m not sorry for not telling you,” Abigail said by way of greeting. Will stood beside the passenger door, a cup of shitty gas station coffee in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. His watch had died somewhere just before the border. Since ditching his phone, he hadn’t felt the need to dig through his bag in order to charge the thing, seeing as how one without the other was somewhat of a moot point.

He glanced to the black, blank screen, and he wondered why he was even still wearing it. He hadn’t thought about his steps since Hannibal’s office. Streak broken. He wasn’t sure if that meant *something*, and if it did mean something, he wasn’t ready to unbox it yet, much the same way
he wasn’t quite ready to unbox that there was another person inside of his head that killed people so that he didn’t have to.

“I didn’t tell you a lot of things,” he replied.

“You didn’t call, either,” she said, and it took him probably longer than it should have for Will to realize she sounded almost hurt by it. He wasn’t quite focused; maybe the watch having a blank face was more of a problem to him than he thought.

“If I’d known Hannibal had gotten to you first, I would have been…more forthcoming,” he admitted. When she didn’t speak, he took a drag from his cigarette and continued, “hell, when he was breaking into my apartment, you could have just let him in. I asked Beverly to house you because I didn’t want to make you a target of yet another serial killer.”

“I didn’t actually get fired from Subway. I quit.”

Will hummed in agreement. “Figured that an hour into the drive.”

“I followed Beverly following you sometimes, too.”

“We could have all carpooled if you two communicated better.”

“You first,” Abigail shot back.

That was fair. Will’s cheeks ballooned, and he blew air out slowly, counting back from ten.

“Abigail,” he said, and the look she gave him made this so much harder. “You’re…not guilty of anything, really.”

“Says the guy that called me ‘the knowing bait’,” she retorted.

“No, I mean it…” he sighed and looked around the decrepit gas station pointedly. “I’m abetting a murderer.” Silence. He scowled and continued, “right now, you could walk away and not face any legal persecution should you go back to the states, whereas I would go to jail. That guy in there –”

“The one you stabbed –”

“I don’t remember stabbing – look, him too. The three of us would go to jail, but you wouldn’t.”

His cigarette had burned too low; he let out a hiss when it singed his fingers, and he stubbed it out on the tire before tossing the butt of it in the trashcan by the pump. Too late, he saw the warning on the pump that said not to smoke while gassing up. Will glanced about, but there was no one to scold him on the dangers of such endeavors. There was only him and Abigail at the moment, and he’d have almost welcomed Hannibal coming to interrupt them. He could imagine how a psychiatrist would be a much better option for giving advice than he would.

Abigail looked out past the cars parked just at the treeline, the expanse beyond it. Her expression was difficult to read, a mix of something pained and something hopeful.

“I don’t have anything else,” she said, and when she looked back to him, she smiled. In that moment, he’d have called it genuine. “I told you before, I’m looking for closure. Since that’s all that seems to matter to me at this point, I’ll stick around until I find it.”

Will sucked air in sharply, frowning. “The consequences –”

“I know how to juggle consequences. I can weigh the risk of pros and cons.”
Given how long she lived under the roof of the Minnesota Shrike, he believed her. When it was time
to go, they climbed back into a beat-up Tahoe they’d swapped somewhere in the middle of nowhere,
and she made a point to lay her head in Will’s lap, much like she had back at the apartment.

Much later, Will would find a polaroid of the scene tucked into his jacket pocket, the colors washed
out and faded but still good. He tucked it into his shirt pocket, to preserve the color.

“I’m just outside of Tattler News, Jerry, and here we’ve got not only fans of the paper demanding
answers, we’ve got some of Will Graham’s ‘avid fans’ here with signs! Just this past evening, as we
know, Will Graham’s apartment was invaded by the FBI, boxes upon boxes removed from the scene
as they attempt to glean over anything they can in order to find both him, as well as the Chesapeake
Ripper. So far, there is no information revealed as to whether or not they have any solid leads to their
whereabouts.”

“Now, I know we’re dealing with the Chesapeake Ripper, Chet, but I think what’s interesting are the
avid fans of Graham’s you’ve got gathered around you!”

“Yes, these people aren’t here for news on the Ripper, they’re actually here for Will Graham. You
can hear some of them in the back, chanting –you can hear it, can’t you?”

“Yes, of course!”

“They’re upset that the suspect in the disappearance of Hannibal Lecter –”

“——Hannibal the Cannibal, more like —”

“Hannibal the Cannibal, I like it, I like it! They’re not here about that, though, they’re here because
they support Will Graham, and they want to be here first should any news strike on him.”

“Have you spoken to any of them, Chet?”

“I have, Jerry! Excuse me, miss, do you have a moment?”

“I’m not saying anything bad about Ill Intentions or Will Graham.”

“You support him, then?”

“I don’t know if you’ve ever actually read his writing, but he speaks to us. We wouldn’t be here if it
wasn’t for him!”

“How do you feel when you think about the accusations laid at his doorstep? Abetting a serial killer,
of all things?”

“Accusations? Okay, look, how do we know that he wasn’t kidnapped? How do we know that the
moment the Ripper realized Will knew who he was and what he was going to drop in the papers,
that he didn’t kidnap him in order to eat him? Maybe he’s laying low until he knows it’s safe to come
out. Clearly he’s safer as far away from the FBI as possible!”

“What do you think about the gas station camera showing him leaving the scene with Abigail Hobbs
and Hannibal Lecter?”

“Anything can be doctored these days, jeez! And this isn’t some TV show CSI stuff where you can
zoom in and just ‘see clearly’ you know, I worked at a store where we had cameras and whenever
we pulled them up to catch thieves, the cops always said it was too blurry! So prove to me it’s clear enough to see, and I’ll —

“Chet, that’s all the time we have for tonight, but keep to the streets! We’ll be there live the moment something happens.”

“Thanks, Jerry, coming to you live from the steps of Tattler News, this is Chet with Channel 5 News, and have a good night.”

“I’m just saying! There’s no definitive proof that —”

-

Dear Jack,

My condolences in regards to your wife. You’ll think I’m mocking you, but I mean that with utmost sincerity. Because of me, you’ll never find the closure for her that you promised, and if your pride is stronger than your grief, you’ll never wear your wedding band again.

Some things, though, are more important to me than your wedding, your wife, and your troubles.

Since I first met you so many months ago, you have been somewhat of a partner and someone of a problem for me. There was once a time that I’d have killed —pun intended—to work with the FBI, to be part of something bigger than myself. Time with you has shown me just what that would have been like, and I’m almost grateful that I was too mentally unstable to qualify. Something tells me that if I’d ever ended up in the BAU with you, I’d have one day wished we’d never met.

There was once a time I was in your corner. There was once a time where I honestly, truly wanted to help. Then I realized that you used people like others use staplers or hunting dogs: whenever you want, however you want, with no consideration of how or where the chips fall when you do. I’ve got enough of a stable head on my shoulders these days to realize what that entails for someone like me —disposable. Not a true employee, therefore not a true problem.

Until I became a true problem, I suppose.

I can’t say that my choices have been right, or if they’ve been just. I can say that I have never felt more alive, and I feel very much part of this world and the moments that I’m in it. I appreciate them far better since this all began, and I’m looking forward to the ones that come.

Catch me if you can,

-Will Graham

-

Two Years Later:

When a novel entitled Ill Intentions hit bookstore shelves without warning one bright and sunny Monday morning, copies were sold out by mid-afternoon. By Tuesday, those avidly devouring each word stormed to the internet and social media, raving about the contents within, and by Tuesday afternoon the FBI was involved.

Unfortunately for the FBI, the agent that had sent the manuscript to the publishing house had never actually met the suspect Will Graham, author of the thriller that would hit the New York Time’s Bestseller List in the months to come. In fact, after a brief e-mail chain from over a year before,
fleshing out final drafts, Chiyoh would admit to Jack Crawford, head of the BAU for the FBI, that they could only show a single text from a burner phone traced to somewhere in Alaska that read the following:

**Ask Jack Crawford if he’s still refusing to wear his wedding band when you meet him.**

Of course, when Chiyoh received an e-mail from a scrambled domain two days after being questioned, they knew not to call the FBI back. Jack Crawford most certainly wasn’t wearing his wedding band; time had not healed his wounds.

And in the months to come, no one would find the missing author to the best cat-and-mouse crime thriller to have ever been written—a direct quote from the *Morning Show with Mara*. The novel was his only clue, and no matter how many times his avid fans poured through the pages, made road trips to the places referenced, gleaned over the metaphors left behind, there wasn’t a single hint that Will Graham was even still alive.

They had faith, though. *This is the most fun I’ve had in years*, one avid fan confessed online.

The sales kept climbing. No one quite knew what the agent did with the royalties.

-  

*Three Years Later:*

“Writing?”

Will looked up from his laptop briefly and nodded. The sun was hot, and sweat made the collar of his shirt mildly damp. It was a good vantage point, though, with a great view. The kind of view writers killed to have as their muse.

“We’ll need to move soon,” he said, and Hannibal hummed non-committedly. A common discussion between them, and sooner or later Hannibal always caved. He had a hunger for new, and whether that was a new view or a new hunt, either way worked in their favor. Will kept them on the run, and Hannibal kept them curious enough to keep going.

“Are you editing?” Hannibal asked.

“Final stages,” said Will, and he scowled over a comma splice and fixed it. “When I send this, we’ll have to go.”

“Abigail’s school isn’t out for another week and a half.”

“She can send a letter to her professors,” he returned.

“You were the one to say that schooling was important.”

“It is.”

Hannibal smiled and sat down beside him, leg crossed elegantly. “You also said that we shouldn’t split up.”

“We shouldn’t.”

They looked to one another, and Will was the first to fold. He sighed and looked back to the word document, thumb idly tapping on the space bar. It wasn’t his old laptop, but it was a nice one none-the-less. Top model, fast processor. He hadn’t been sure how to explain to the sales rep. that he
literally just needed something nice enough for word document, and by the time Hannibal had
walked over, the French had been butchered just poorly enough that they paid quickly and left with
the first model to have been suggested despite having no need for a computer whose processor could
run top of the model videogames.

“I’ll wait to send this until school is out.”

“Mike found something in Germany that looks promising,” Hannibal offered. Germany had been on
Will’s list for some time.

“Did you send him money?”

Hannibal nodded, took his hand and held it. It was as familiar a move as breathing, as shifting to a
better position in your seat. Will squeezed his hand, and Hannibal squeezed back. Conversations
about Mike had never quite eased into something simple, but the physical contact helped. Mike
stayed as far away from Will as possible, and Will tried to pretend that interacting casually with
someone he’d stabbed in the past was perfectly normal.

To Hannibal, it very much was, and he saw little wrong with the way things were. Will and Abigail
supposed that they could take the bad with the good, and that was that.

“What’s this novel about?” Hannibal wondered, and he looked over Will’s shoulder to read a
passage from it.

“I thought to do a sequel, but everyone does sequels,” said Will.

“Yes, and they’re never as good as the first,” Hannibal agreed.

Talking about writing was an intimate affair to Will. He always tried to write what he knew, and for
a long time that’d been nothing more than blank screens and frustrating evenings over a fifth of Jack.
To share something like that, though, he figured was always difficult for writers –their words, their
work was their lifeblood, and for someone to read over it and possibly reject used to be more than he
wanted to deal with.

After being on the run for so long, some fears had eased over time; not all, but some.

“Chiyoh said that this coming Fall would be the best time for something new to drop. The FBI isn’t
tailing her anymore, either,” Will said. He chewed on his bottom lip, then, “I’m writing about you.”

“You know, I like her. She’s resourceful, and she knows not to ask too many questions. The more
you know, the more liable you are.”

“She said that Jack still isn’t wearing his wedding band.”

Hannibal laughed, not entirely kind. “That is what you get for leaving him with the parting gift you
did. ‘Catch me if you can’. Do you think he will, someday?”

Will looked back to the sunset bleeding over the tops of the trees, something rich in reds and oranges,
all russets and deep ocher. The trees’ leaves looked dipped in blood, the promise of good weather
according to the locals. Will would miss Spain. Somewhere along the way, they’d likely circle back,
but it wasn’t safe to stay in a place for more than a year unless it was somewhere rural, somewhere
no one often thought to tread.

“If he finds us, his intentions will be less than pleasant,” Will replied after a while, turning memories
over in his head. Molly had married at some point, and Beverly had taken over Charlie’s spot after it
was revealed that Charlie and Todd both had a cocaine problem. Tattler News was now Beacon Weekly and Freddie Lounds was running a solo career online since the change. The avid fans were still avid, but it had been some time since Will had walked into his home to find someone unexpected inside of it.

That had been a burglary that hadn’t ended necessarily in the burglar’s favor.

“Dare I say he’d have ill intentions?”

“Hah.”

Silence, save for birds screaming in the distance, dipping into the trees below blackened by the steadily growing night. Will watched them, felt Hannibal watching him.

“What story of mine are you telling?” Hannibal asked after some time.

“They know my story…but they don’t really know yours. Readers were able to see who I was before you, but who was the Chesapeake Ripper before me?”

“Do you think of things like that? ‘Before me’ and ‘after me’?”

“I think of who we are now.” Will glanced over and smiled wanly. “Is there an ‘after me’ for you?”

Hannibal loved answering questions with questions. “Is there an ‘after me’ for you?”

Will looked back to the sunset. “I don’t know if we’d survive the separation.”

“Then it’s best we continue traveling together, for the sake of our survival.”

It was quiet once more, and when Hannibal leaned in for a kiss, Will let him. He wasn’t quite sure what the future would bring, but one thing was for certain:

He hadn’t worn that watch in years, and if he had his way he’d never wear it again.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are...The End.

I think that naturally, as a writer, I had way too much fun writing this. I don't normally go into fourth wall territory, but in this case, I had to and I'm not sorry ;)

As a side note, because of the chromebook I have for traveling right now, there was no way for me to format this to where it followed the similar indents from my other fics. Not the end of the world for me, but...still a pain.

Thank you all for your support of this story, as well as the others I've written. I have had so much fun delving into this world and the characters within it, and I'm so happy to continue on to The Unquiet Grave!

For now, I'll be reading through my outlines and making sure my chapters line up. Stay tuned for what comes next! And thank you for making this such a fun fandom to be in. 
<3
End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr as Elfnerderherder -come say hello!

A special thanks to my patrons: Sylarana, Duhaunt6, Mendacious Bean, Superlurk, Cecily, Evertonem, Inky-Starlight, Heather Feather, Laura G., and Dancy_85!

Works inspired by this one: "Ill Intentions" Cover art by marlahanni

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!