National Anthem

by OnWednesdaysWeStudyinPink

Summary

It’s 2012 and the Democrats have secured the White House with the dynamic cousins Hannibal Lecter & Bedelia Du Maurier, a powerhouse team that have managed to turn the politics of Washington onto its head. Lecter’s adopted daughter Abigail is the darling of the media & the country is eager to see if the Lecter Administration will live up to the cousins’ Uncle Jack Kennedy’s Camelot.

Will Graham has been hired to be the new personal aide to the president, much to the chagrin of Vice President Du Maurier and White House Chief of Staff Jack Crawford. Waiting in the shadows is Freddie Lounds of Tattle-Politic, eager to find a scandal with the horrific murder of the president’s previous aide Clarice Starling and the missing Secret Service Agent Miriam Lass.

But despite the tempest Hannibal and the White House have to deal with 24/7, Will discovers that the Lecters are his eye of the storm and everything he can come to rely on for the family he needs. And as he reveals more of himself to them, they are only too eager to return the favour.
Prologue

October 21, 2009

Through the powerful scope on her rifle, Abigail watches as her quarry walks carefully and hesitantly through the old growth trees, stepping on the small, delicate saplings that were trying to grow amongst the fallen leaves. It’s a cold morning, leaving her thankful for the lined hunting clothes she had changed into a few hours before. Her new hunting vest is patterned with various textures of leaves and elk elegant antlers—the camouflage is called Boneyard and it makes her feel powerful—she’s worn death as a cloak her whole life and out here as she awaited quietus, she gives silent thanks for what she was about to receive, promising to honour every part.

“Now, Dad?” she asks softly, knowing that her father is tracking their kill as well.

“Patience, my Abigail.” Her father’s leather gloved hand rests on her shoulder, his voice quiet and steady. “Do you have him in your sight?”

“Yes. Perfect headshot. He won’t feel a thing,” she assures.

She doesn’t have to look at him to know he’s nodding to give his approval. “Take it when you’re ready.”

Abigail exhales softly and pulls the trigger. Adrenaline floods through her and she brakes away from her father, bolting through the trees to reach what had been felled by her shot. Behind her, she can hear her father laugh, running after her. This will be her only kill this season as SATs and ACTs are going to take up the rest of her time—she can’t help how passionate and excited she is, and she is relieved that he is amused by her break in composure instead of disappointed.

She reaches the buck first and drops down beside him, running her fingers through his long red hair as she pulls her hunting knife out of its holster. Her father turns the body over and she looks into the brown eyes that are glazing over, the exit wound almost dead centre through the forehead. She smiles and drags her fingers through the blood and brain matter leaking out.

They’d found this particular buck at a rest stop on their trip up to their hunting grounds; he’d been drunk, urinating on the side of the concrete restrooms, and then exposed himself to her. Naturally, her father had found this behaviour unacceptable and many hours later, the buck had found himself alone in the cold woods, confused and almost sober. She and her father—her hunting partner—had spent the night parked miles away from the only road to the preserve, exchanging stories about school and drinking the hot chocolate she’d brought along, staying warm in the rental. Then as dawn broke, they’d taken the unconscious buck out of the trunk and dragged him out further into the forest, then lie in wait for him to wake up and run. They’d quietly tracked him for two hours, keeping their distance and observing him with a mix of humour and hunger.
“A perfect shot, Abigail,” he commends, nodding his permission for her to start cutting the clothes off. “I shall get the supplies from the car.”

As he returns to their rental, she cuts away his clothing, curiously going through all his pockets; she had a fondness for other’s wallets and what they contain. He’d had small photos of his wife and kids and ragged edged business cards for a car dealership and auto shop, nothing that really interests her. The money will be pocketed later and spent on something frivolous like a new cellphone case or Starbucks with her classmates, her own special allowance that her father didn’t concern himself with.

This buck has three poorly drawn tattoos on his right arm and she studies them intently so that she could think about them on lonely nights when she can’t sleep. A tribal sun, the Notre Dame Fightin’ Irish leprechaun, and a woman’s name that was so faded and broken from sun exposure that she isn’t sure if it said ‘Rachel’ or ‘Rochelle’. Not that it really matters to her. She didn’t care who this other woman was—she’s the only woman in his life now. Again she runs her fingers through his hair, her fingertips scraping on his scalp as she smiles at him.

And then she cracks open his ribs to allow access to the rest of him.

Her father returns and together they begin to remove the organ meat, the blood steaming as it hist the cool air. Heart, liver, and lungs were slipped into plastic freezer bags, then stacked neatly into a large cooler unit. The container fills quickly with organs and once the buck is completely gutted, they carry him over to a thick oak with a low hanging branch, and use the rope she had slung across her shoulder and chest to truss his bare ankles together and hang him from the branch. Field dressing is as close to her father’s own art as she can get without directly plagiarising and she takes pride in propping open the chest cavity with sticks and draining the rest of the blood to the forest floor below.

There is always the worry that there will be something wrong with the meat, but her father hadn’t smelt anything off on the buck and as per usual, he is right. She begins to mentally list how she wants to prepare the cheeks and tongue, recipes of delicate spices and pale herbs dancing across her palette from memory. She always favours those parts of the body, soft and identifying; her father is partial to the meats rich in iron.

The preserve is on Kennedy land and no one but immediate family are allowed on it; until this August, Uncle Ted had really been the only one who came out anyway—only for one week during pheasant season and never this far out, so she and her father have no concerns about the remains of their hunts being found. Now Uncle Ted is gone and it leaves the woods for them alone. She enjoys the time she and her father spend together in these woods; both are so meticulous in their work and getting to be leisurely about the hunt instead of rushed like in the city is such a blessing that she can’t take it for granted.

The buck’s blood drains out onto sycamore leaves dried and curled into bowls, collecting small pools of the red liquid; during other kills they might collect the blood for sausage, puddings, sauces, and soups, but they have limited storage space in their kitchen this year, so they decided to forgo the precious ingredient in lieu of the meat they prefer. Her father produces a thermos of warmed milk and he pours them both small cups of it before collecting the last of the draining blood to mix into the drinks. Her stomach growls and she accepts her cup with a quick smile—it’s better than the wine she gets at stupid communion on Sundays. As she greedily swallows down the rich liquid, her father speaks.

“I have something I’d wish to discuss with you.”

As if she has a choice not to talk. “Anything.”
“You have no doubt noticed how frequently your aunt and I have been meeting with Jack Crawford.” He pours more milk into her cup and she nods. “Your aunt and I have been asked to be front runners in the Democratic presidential nominees for the 2012 elections.”

Her eyes widen and she licks her lips. “Really?”

“I know it will be a lot of hard work, but I feel it will be a wonderful opportunity for our family.” He gives her a fond smile, his gloved hand cupping her face. “I love you, Abigail.”

Accepting the invitation of affection, she throws her arms around him, both their breath smelling of blood. “I love you, too, Dad.”
Chapter One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
“Hannibal, I have the files of potential aides.”

Hannibal Lecter turned to look at his Chief of Staff, Jack Crawford; he loathed Jack’s mannerisms at times, especially how casual and overly familiar he was when he stood in the oval office. Hannibal held the highest position in the country and while he wasn’t expecting people to kneel at his feet like loyal subjects, he would appreciate the formalities of being addressed as ‘President Lecter’.

Friday evening was settling over Washington DC and the heady scent of chocolate and raspberries had filled the Oval Office as he finished the final notes for his speech on the Hurricane Sandy legislation that was being held up by congress; he had a few carefully worded insults for the speaker of the house that would no doubt pressure the right constituents into passing the bill. The kitchen had brought up a rich cake and dessert plates for he and his staff to indulge in, though at this point most of his staffers had gone home. Abigail was sprawled on one of the cream coloured couches, her foot bobbing up and down in time to the music she was listening to on her laptop as she typed; knowing his daughter, she’d most likely muted her music the moment Jack walked in to listen to their conversation.

Hannibal sat down at the desk, glancing over the files that Jack had tossed onto the blotter. Jack cut himself an oversized slice of cake and Hannibal pursed his lips slightly at the rudeness, but ignored it and went back to glancing over the files. All had pictures of bright-eyed, enthusiastic young men and women ready to head to university, interns that would be devoted to his every whim and desire as his previous had been. Jack sat down at the desk across from him and ate his cake, making small noises of approval.

After an appropriate amount of time, Hannibal named what it was he actually wanted. “What about Will Graham?”

Jack’s brow furrowed as he chewed and swallowed the cake. “Uh, Graham? He’s not a personal aide.”

Hannibal set the files down and steepled his fingers. “No, but you spoke so highly of him. You called him a genius and I know you do not use that word lightly.”

“I don’t—“ Jack chuckled, setting his fork down. “I don’t think he’ll be very interested. He’s got a job teaching at his alma mater.”

Hannibal smiled. “Convince him. That’s what you’re good at.”

“That’s what you’re good at.” Jack’s smile faded slightly and he tapped his fork tines against the plate. “Are you sure you want him? He’s…”

Hannibal feigned puzzlement. “He’s what?”

“Standoffish. Not really interested in being around the faces, much more comfortable standing
behind the scenes. And even then, you have to twist his arm to make him work with people. You remember how he was in Alabama.”

Hannibal wouldn’t be swayed—Alabama had been the moment he realised Graham could be a long term project for him. “Jack, you know these files you brought me might work for someone else, but not me. I need someone with a mind that can keep up with mine. Tell me that Good Will could not be my equal and I won’t ask again.”

Jack’s face betrayed the conflicting emotions within his mind. “Look, even if I can get him to meet with you, it’s going to be an uphill battle to keep him here.”

“Why is he so resistant?” Hannibal had his suspicions, but would rather have Jack voice them.

“He’s…his imagination. He can’t trust people. He sees right through them.”

What a wonderful prospect. “Everyone?”

Jack’s smile broadened. “Even you, Hannibal.”

“All the more reason to have him at my side. I don’t need people who wish to keep me happy. I need someone who can think as me.”

“Abigail’s not already doing that?”

Behind Jack, Abigail looked up and smiled at him. He returned it with a fond look.

“I don’t wish to burden her further with remaining as my aide.” Hannibal leaned back in his chair. “Bring him to me, Jack.”

*****

Will Graham stuffed papers into his messenger bag, flinching with every bent corner he created as he forced them in, but made no effort to fix what he was doing. His anxiety had picked up at the beginning of his lecture and he’d popped two aspirin for the fever he was confident that he was imagining had returned to haunt him. A few students were lingering in an attempt to catch his attention, no doubt wishing to ask questions about the Lecter administration. He could feel their eyes on him and it made his skin crawl; why couldn’t they just gather their things and leave him?

There were footsteps approaching him and he quickly donned his glasses once more, wishing to limit any form of eye contact. He could hear his remaining students talking quickly amongst themselves, all watching him; the air in the room suddenly felt smothering with the prospect of confrontation between whomever had come to talk to him. He shivered at the imagined sensation of being looked at and pulled his mind away from the idea as quickly as he could; when he looked up, he was surprised at who he saw and not in a good way.

Jack Crawford, Hannibal Lecter’s campaign directer and husband of the White House Press Secretary, was standing at his podium, seemingly oblivious to the stares they were receiving. Their reunion would no doubt produce a multitude of rumors on campus to take roots over the weekend, weeds that would have to be dealt with on the following Monday.

‘Beware the Ides of fucking March,’ he thought to himself sourly.

“Will, good to see you.” Jack’s hands were in his pockets and he rocked on his heels as though they were good friends.
Will was not going to pretend he was happy to see the other man. “Can I help you, Jack?”

“I actually have a job for you.”

Will directed a particularly sour look towards the last of the students who thankfully took the hint and left him alone with the older man.

“A job you couldn’t email me about?” He made sure his emphasis was particularly nasty; Jack was up to his usual bullshit and it had him worried.

Jack’s smile stayed, but his friendly tone was becoming forced. “Not the kind I could just email you about.”

“I have a job.” Will forced the words through his clenched teeth.

Jack’s voice softened and he reached a hand out. “May I?”

Will froze as Jack’s hand came up to push his glasses up properly and he made fleeting eye contact with the other man.

“Will, you’ve been requested as a personal aide to the president,” Jack announced, his voice an odd mixture of admiration and apprehension.

Will gave a short and angry sounding laugh. “Are you joking?”

The older man’s face remained serious, indicating that there was indeed no punchline. “No.”

Will sneered. “Who would be stupid enough ask for me as a personal aide to the president? I’m not even on a list for that kind of job.”

“The president asked for you,” Jack said simply.

“The president asked for me,” Will repeated, needing to sound snide though he was certain the fear was apparent in his voice.

“And when the president asks you to do something, there are only two answers you can give him: ‘yes’ and ‘yes, sir’.” Jack held up both of his hands to preemptively stop Will from snapping out his refusal. “Come with me, let him see you’re not interested, and you’ll be left alone.”

Will began to cram his papers into his bag violently, needing to mask the trembling of his hands. “Fine. When?”

“Breakfast tomorrow morning. Six sharp. Show up at a quarter ’til and I’ll get you prepped.” As Jack headed towards the lecture hall’s exit, he called back over his shoulder cheerfully. “And bring that sunny disposition, Will!”

*****

Wolf Trap, Virginia was twenty-four minutes from Washington DC, but to Will, it was an entirely different world. As he listened to the microwave hum around his second frozen dinner, he watched one of the many DVDs he still had left over from his time on the Lecter-Du Maurier 2012 campaign. The kitchen table was covered in the most recent news regarding the president America had elected last November and his laptop’s screen was cluttered with various video files he’d opened to study. The particular clip he was watching was one he’d actually missed live—Lecter was walking hand in hand with his daughter Abigail, the two waving to the screaming crowd as confetti and streamers fell
around them; Du Maurier was walking behind them, smiling and waving as well, joining them at the podium. Lecter finally managed to get the crowd to settle and he began his acceptance speech.

“The people of America have asked for a new dawn upon the this great land and I have answered their call—”

Will paused the clip to retrieve his dinner; a terrier enthusiastically begged for him to share, but he shushed the small dog firmly. When he brought the dinner back, peeling the thin plastic cover back to let it cool, he selected another video clip to watch, this one of the then-candidate’s daughter on ‘The View’. Abigail Lecter, was a very beautiful young woman, full of cheerful smiles and wide-eyed youth. Wind-chaffed skin, brilliant blue eyes, long dark hair, and a smattering of freckles, she was the ideal child for a politician; graduated from high school at sixteen, active in various hometown charities, passionate about her father’s career.

Will was curious, as most of America was, about the damaged goods Hannibal Lecter called ‘daughter’. Everyone knew the story: a young Abigail had been held at knifepoint by her psychotic biological father in a hospital waiting room and then nearly succeeded in slitting her throat. Hannibal, who’d been a surgeon at the time, had managed to get the injured girl away and Hobbs had stabbed himself in the femoral artery with his hunting knife, bleeding to death as Hannibal had worked to save Abigail’s life. During her coma and subsequent recovery, Hannibal had filed for guardianship over her and a year after, had adopted her. There had been a very nasty fallout when it had been revealed by the FBI that Hobbs had in fact been killing and eating the men he’d hunted in Maryland’s Frederick Municipal Forest during deer and elk season, and the victims’ families had demanded reparations from the only living member of the Hobbs family.

Of course very few news organisations had the nerve to actually ask her about her past and naturally Freddie Lounds, Washington DC’s most foul political tabloid journalist, had run different versions of the gruesome story multiple times and referenced it anytime the young Lecter was mentioned. Abigail was the darling of the American political dynasties, though Will wasn’t stupid. Bad things always left stains, no matter how good a cleaner Hannibal was. When Will had met her on the campaign trail, he’d been careful not to stare at the scarves around her throat, but he’d watched her covertly; she seemed dependent on her father’s presence, a lifeline amidst the insanity of collecting votes. That was of course to be expected, but something else resided beneath her surface. It wasn’t sinister, but it was something he was keenly aware of within himself, as well. She’d never spoke to him, so he was unable to get a deeper glimpse into her mind, but he had sensed it nevertheless.

In this particular video, Abigail was sat on the semi circle couch the View used to accommodate its five hosts and guest, she being placed in the centre for all to stare at. Will watched her face and allowed his mind to slide comfortably into her poised ease with having all of America looking at her. She was dressed in a flattering navy dress with an airy red, white, and blue scarf tied neatly around her neck; he’d never gave an opinion on whether or not she should be displayed to the public (he would never have allowed it had she been his daughter) and Lecter had gone along with Jack’s advice to use her to their advantage.

“I’ve been very blessed to have this upbringing. I try my hardest to give back, to share all the good fortune I have. I may never be a perfect role model to everyone, but I hope that at the very least I can be a good representative for America.”

“I think you’re a great role model to young Americans,” Elisabeth Hasselbeck declared.

“I wouldn’t wish to speak for people who can’t relate to my life experiences. It wouldn’t be fair to think that all the privileges I’ve had reflects everyone my age and what they live daily. But I do want to help anyone who asks me for help, no matter who they are, no matter how different we might be. I
Joy Behar gave Abigail an approving smile as Barbara Walters leaned in slightly from her position at the end of the couch to ask, “What about at home? What is it like to be Governor Lecter’s daughter?”

Abigail laughed. “I have a very normal home life. I have chores and homework, and charity work. Dad keeps me very busy.”

“What about friends? What do they think of your father running for office?”

“My friends are all really excited that my dad could be the next president of the United States. And they think it would be cool if I lived in the White House!”

The audience laughed delightedly at her enthusiasm and she gave them a radiant rewarding smile. Will couldn’t help but feel touched by her presence as well.

“What will you be sad to move from Maryland if your Father wins?” Sherri Shepard asked.

At this, Abigail’s smile faded slightly, and her eyes became distant, triggering a pang of homesickness Will surrendered to. “Well, Maryland is the first place I was ever really able to call home. It’s been good to me—both the land and the people.” Then the full force of her smile returned and she made eye contact with the audience. “But life is all about embracing change, isn’t it? This would be such a wonderful opportunity to be part of our Nation’s capitol. Besides—I don’t think Dad would let me stay behind if I didn’t want to go.”

She gave a teasing smile and everyone laughed once again.

Will stopped the clip and moved on to the next one. Hannibal Lecter was sitting across from Jon Stewart on the Daily Show, wearing one of his ‘casual’ outfits, still looking every bit New England Prep where he’d grown up. There was no denying that even out of his bespoke suits he was still very handsome and while politics should be based on the words said, it was still a game based on physical appearance and Lecter was winning that by a landslide.

“What do you think of President Chilton’s twitter accounts? I find the whole thing embarrassing. I know he’s not writing any of it and even if he was, none of it is interesting.”

It was no secret that Stewart hated President Chilton with a passion and took any opportunity available to smear his reputation.

Lecter smiled and smoothly replied, “I’ll admit that I’m not one of his followers, so I’m unaware of what he posts.”

Stewart grinned and Lecter took a drink from the coffee mug placed in front of him on the desk. “You tweet a lot of philosophical quotes on your twitter account—good ones, too.”

“I hope that it’s a daily dose of inspiration to my followers,” Lecter admitted humbly. “My daughter insisted I get an account so that the citizens of Maryland could connect with me. I would have used her account to model my own, but Abigail’s tweets seem to follow a pattern of One Direction lyrics and very inspired self portraits in the foyer mirror.”

Off stage came a scandalised, “Dad!” and the camera quickly panned to a red faced Abigail. The camera returned to the stage as Stewart let out his trademark giggle and Lecter grinned apologetically in his daughter’s direction.
"I'm sorry, darling."

Stewart leaned in conspiratorially, all smiles. "You never take 'inspired self portraits' in the mirror, Governor Lecter?"

Lecter shook his head. "I don’t believe anyone is terribly interested in looking at me. I’m afraid I would lose followers."

There was laughter from the audience as well as a few flirtatious whistles which Stewart seemed to agree with. "I don’t know. I have a few staffers who wouldn’t mind seeing your face pop up in their notifications."

"I shall take your advice then." The audience got louder as the Governor suddenly stood and pulled his phone out of his trouser’s right pocket. "Shall we?"

Stewart scrambled out of his chair to join Lecter in an impromptu photo for twitter and the audience cheered and laughed—

Will closed the video files he’d just watched and exhaled loudly, remembering the microwaved dinner that had long since cooled off. He found his fork and began to eat as he tried to piece together why exactly the President had wanted him personally as his aide. The few times they’d interacted Will had been abrasive and defensive, definitely not demonstrating any kind of chemistry that might hint at further work together. Hannibal Lecter was cultured, friendly, and sophisticated; the man everyone saw on television was the exact same man when the cameras were off. He was the rare politician that didn’t have a false persona. Will had no idea what made Lecter think he was designed for the job of presidential aide.

Not that the job should have ever become available to him in the first place.

The President’s previous aide had been found a month ago, neck snapped and body discarded in Folger Park. Will remembered Clarice Starling from the campaign; she had been very friendly, a young redheaded woman who’d kept Lecter’s world completely organised. She’d been brought in by Jack just as he had been, the very best at her job. She and Will hadn’t interacted much, but she’d always given him a smile.

While that had been big news in and of itself, one of the president’s own Secret Service agents had gone missing the same night. Conspiracy theories were always popular in the capitol, but now there wasn’t anywhere one could go without hearing that the two women had been killed by Al Queda/the Russians/the Republicans/the North Koreans. Will had met Miriam Lass from the campaign as well; she’d been a good, albeit zealous agent, though she had always watched him with slight suspicion. But then, everyone seemed to watch him with a certain level of uncertainty—his eyes were always a little wild and he said things that made people uncomfortable. Lass had naturally picked up on that and he was certain that at some point she’d spoken about removing him from Lecter’s tour bus. No doubt Jack was the reason he’d been allowed to remain.

His cell phone vibrated and he glanced down to see Jack had left him a text message, which immediately caused him to frown as he’d not given this particular phone number out to anyone but his veterinarian and doctor.

{5.45AM WHITE HOUSE. 6AM BREAKFAST. IF U NEED A RIDE CALL ME.}

“Jesus, Jack. Take off the capslock.” Will set the phone back down on the table and shut his laptop.

Taking his half eaten dinner to the trash can, he paused and emptied it into the dogs’ food bowls as
an apology for his distant nature, tossing his dirty fork into the sink, before shuffling his feet to the light switch by the doorway of the kitchen. Surrounded in the quiet dark, he whistled to the dogs and the pack quickly got their feet, following him upstairs to the bedroom.

///***///
Chapter End Notes

The detail is amazing!
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

White House floor plans included at the bottom of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You’re hiring me to be his best friend?”

Will grit his teeth, fists clenched at his side as he waited for the Secret Service agent at the third checkpoint in the Residency to verify that yes, he was still Will Graham. They were nodded through and Jack continued his marching pace as staffers greeted him, Will following in his wake.

“The President requires a lot of mental stimulation, Mr Graham. The kind you’re capable of offering him.”

As they journeyed to the staircase that led to the second floor, Jack walked backwards so that he could try to pull out a large crease in Will’s sweater that ran from his right arm pit down across his stomach. Will flinched at the unnecessary physical contact, keeping his eyes focused over Jack’s shoulder at various historical oil paintings adorning the walls.

“On a temporary basis, Jack. I’m not social. Find someone serious to replace Clarice Starling because I’m not doing this forever.”

Another check point that scanned for metals (again) and a quick pat down on Will meant they were finally able to climb the grand stairs to the second floor of the Residency. Jack walked up the steps sideways, his hands desperately working at the sweater as Will found himself experiencing anxiety induced tunnel vision, telling himself that the staircase was not actually getting more narrow and it was just his imagination. At least his false fever hadn’t returned.

On the landing, Jack’s hands mindlessly teased at the wool and acrylic blend. “Will, you haven’t even talked with him yet. You might actually enjoy this.”

“Yeah, right.” Will took a step back, Jack’s hands falling from his sweater. “Just leave it alone! It’s wrinkled!”

“Why couldn’t you put something else on?” Jack snapped.

“Today’s laundry day, Jack. This is the nicest thing I could wear.” The sweater had been recovered from a suitcase he’d forgotten to unpack last fall, so the crease was fairly set at this point; his drier was broken at the moment or he would have tried to tumble the odd pleat (and dusty smell) out. Will attempted to straighten the sweater once more then brought his hands back into fists at his side. “Can we just get this over with?”

Jack’s smile was exceptionally tart. “Of course.”

Jack spun on his heel and marched them down the Center Hall to the Residency’s family kitchen at the end.

The Center Hall was wide and normally boasted desks, arm chairs, and other various seating
arrangements along with many historical artifacts and even a baby grande piano. It appeared that Lecter had not wanted the chaotic, if elegant, presentation and aside from a few long benches that had the presidential seal carved into the solid sides lining the walls, the hall was mercifully minimalistic.

‘This House is my sanctuary and I don’t want to give people a reason to loiter within it. If you are my guest, I will offer your all my hospitality; those that are told to sit on the benches are meant to leave as soon as possible.’ The thoughts entered into his mind without encouragement and Will was quick to shake them free; Lecter’s mind had been one of the few he hadn’t ventured too deep into as there really hadn’t been a need. Most politicians’ minds were oil spills on dark oceans that he desired to contain; Lecter’s mind was the same as staring into the sun, an experience blinding and raw. Impossibly genuine, so impossibly uncorrupted by party politics and general greed, Hannibal Lecter’s honesty had managed to persuade him to join the Lecter-Du Maurier campaign in 2011 as a consultant and then full time in 2012.

Will’s palms felt clammy and his arms itched, all side effects of fear. He wasn’t afraid of Lecter per se, it was simply a reflex of having to be social. In the centre of the modern and polished kitchen stood Hannibal Lecter, the Leader of the Free World. There was something so surreal about seeing the stylish, powerful man holding a glass mixing bowl that he was whisking some sort of thin batter in. How incredibly domestic a figure he cut with the plain white apron tied around his waist and the smell of freshly cut fruit lingering in the air. President Lecter looked up and gave the good-natured, but subtle smile the nation had so fallen in love with and Will found himself being greeted with such familiarity that he might have thought it rude if it wasn’t being said amicably.

“Will, thank you for coming. I apologise that breakfast isn’t ready yet. Would you like to take a seat?”

Will’s eyes glanced at the counter’s bar stool being offered and shook his head. “I’m fine standing, President Lecter. It would be rude of me to sit when you can’t.”

Lecter nodded, his lips quirking for a moment before returning to a well remembered neutral expression. “I trust you are feeling better? I would have checked up on you further, but medical records are sealed even to the president.”

“Yes, the infection is completely gone.” Will kept his eyes focused on the mixing bowl. “Thank you.”

“It was the least I could do for you.” Lecter sprinkled either flour or confectioner’s sugar into the batter. “I trust Jack has told you why you’re here?”

“You’re looking for a new presidential aide. I assumed that the job was supposed to be filled by White House interns.”

“Traditionally.” Lecter’s face lost its smile, becoming mournfully sober. “But with Clarice’s loss, I think it might be time for a change in personnel.”

Will adjusted his glasses where they’d slipped, repositioning the frames so as to avoid eye contact. “Forgive me, but I don’t really remember us having enough interaction to determine that I’d be the right one to request for the job.”

The President’s tone became irritatingly nonchalant. “I had all the interaction I wanted with you at the time.”

Anger flared in Will. “You were just using me.”
Lecter tilted his head slightly and for a moment Will thought he looked amused, but then decided that
the ever polite president would never actually find someone’s ailment humourous. “You were sick
and I didn’t want to exacerbate your mental condition, lest I be wrong and find you were suffering
from something closer to psychosis.”

Will’s hands curled into fists and Jack stepped forward to defuse the situation before it actually
became a situation. “Will, maybe you should calm down.”

Lecter set the mixing bowl down and moved over to another section of the counter occupied by an
expensive looking vacuum coffee maker, opening its faucet to release heavenly smelling coffee into a
cup already waiting below.

“I have no problem with your desire to work alone. I myself am partial to working on my own,
though I find I have to make compromises in this particular field.” Lecter turned and presented him
with the cup of coffee and a saucer. “May I ask you what started your interest in politics, Mr
Graham?”

Will was grateful to place his focus on something other than his false eye contact. “I…understand
why people do the things they do. I could understand the psychology of the politicians and the voters
alike…could see how entire political paths would end. Where a candidate could change the course of
an election because he said the right quote at the right time. It seemed a natural fit. Either that or
police work.”

Jack smiled at him, oozing pride from every pore. “And he’s never been wrong yet. Better than
polling and more accurate than Nate Silver. He can read every location, every population, every
politician. It’s amazing.”

Will shifted uncomfortably, his brow furrowing. “Being in a politician’s head isn’t always the nicest
place to be, Jack. Their thoughts aren’t particularly tasty.”

Lecter—to his surprise—nodded. “Mine aren’t. No effective barriers.”

“Associations come quickly,” Lecter agreed.

“So do forts.”

They were quiet for a moment as Will drank more of the coffee, Jack shifting impatiently at his side.
Will knew that he wanted to butt into the conversation again, but Lecter’s focus seemed to solely be
on Will, which excluded Jack entirely for the time being.

“Not fond of eye contact, are you?” Lecter ventured.

Will refused to look at the president. “Eyes are distracting. You see too much. You don’t see enough.
And it’s hard to focus when you’re thinking ‘those whites are really white’ or ‘they must have
hepatitis,’ or ‘is that a burst vein?’ So I try to avoid eyes whenever possible.”

Lecter wasn’t deflected from making his observations however and continued. “I imagine what you
see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked
at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you
love.”

Will’s felt as though he’d been hit in the face. “What?”
“I’m sorry, Will. Observing is what we do. I can’t shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off.” Lecter’s face no longer had a smile and had no signs of mocking, but the damage was done.

“I’m sorry, is this a job interview or a psych eval?” Will asked, failing to suppress the somewhat hysterical tone in his voice. “I don’t even want to be here and you’re psychoanalysing me? Don’t psychoanalyse me! Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a class on Monday I should be preparing for.”

Will pushed past Jack and out the kitchen, storming through the East Sitting Room and into the Center Hallway, his hands clenching and unclenching.

“Maybe storming out on the president isn’t the greatest idea, Will! Stop!” Jack snapped, hurrying to catch up to him.

“I’m not going to have some asshole politician think they’re allowed to treat me like that, president or not! Acting like he knows me when we’ve talked to one another for all of five minutes!” Will snarled. “I’m not here to get walked over.”

Jack grabbed him roughly by the upper arm and forced him onto one of the benches in the hallway. “Sit. Down. And wait. For. Me.”

There was a vein bulging on Jack’s neck in an alarming fashion and Will determinedly stared at the decorative moulding on the wall across from him. Jack spun around and practically ran back to the kitchen, no doubt to make apologies and kiss Lecter’s ass for the behaviour of poor defective—

“Hey, you’re Will Graham, aren’t you?”

Will hadn’t heard anyone approach him and he flinched sharply as he looked up to see an attractive Secret Service agent smiling down at him.

“Yeah, I remember you from the campaign. Jack had to pull strings to get you by the president. I’m Beverly Katz,” she introduced.

“You’re one of the President’s detail agents,” he said as he looked away. “Sorry about Miriam Lass.”

Her smile took a sadder appearance. “Well, we’re keeping our fingers crossed that everything’s okay.”

He refused to put actual hope into that optimistic ideology. “Right.”

“So the Doctor wants you to be his PA.” He made a face and she quickly clarified. “We call him ‘the Doctor’. Jimmy and Zeller call him ‘the Count’, though. Idiots. So are you going to take the job?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but was saved from speaking when two additional people approached them.

“This Graham?” A man his age stared at him curiously.

Agent Jimmy Price nodded and gave Will an acknowledging smile. “We’ve met.”

Will nodded and the other man held out his hand to him. “Hi, I’m Agent Brian Zeller. Nice to meet you.”

Will politely shook. “Hello. Weren’t you Abigail’s detail originally?”

“Yeah, during the campaign. The moved me over to the Count’s detail after Miriam went missing.” Zeller looked him over. “So you the new aide?”
“I’ve—I’ve not accepted the job,” Will said primly.

“Why not?” Beverly asked, eyebrows raised.

“Because I’m not exactly a people person,” he replied, daring them to disagree.

Price began to open his mouth, but the three agents abruptly switched into a formal mode, their stances at attention for the young woman who’d approached their conversation. Will realised it was Abigail Lecter and he immediately stood up as well; she was standing just a shade too close to him and he took a step back, his eyes avoiding her intent ones.

She tucked her long hair behind her ear then clasped her hands in front of her. “Hi.”

The agents didn’t speak as she clearly only interested in him; he wondered if she had heard everything he’d said to her father as she’d come from the same direction as the kitchen. “Hello, First Lady Abigail.”

“Want to take a walk with me?” He fidgeted with his glasses and she smiled. “It’s okay. My dad is talking with Jack. Smoothing everything over. Come on.”

He hesitated only a moment before walking alongside her in the direction of the kitchen once again, leaving the agents and their uncomfortable stares. Once they were out of obvious earshot, she began to speak.

“I remember you from the campaign. Uncle Jack said you had encephalitis and that’s why you didn’t come along with us for very long?”

Just the mention of encephalitis made his forehead burn and he reminded himself that the fever wasn’t real. “Yes. Your father was the one who figured it out.”

She nodded knowingly. “He smelt it on you.”

“Yes.” He wondered if she had been told or if she was simply used to the politician’s strange ability. She tilted her head to glance at the large historical mural painted on the wall to their right. “I’m sorry you were agitated this morning. My father is just enthusiastic.”

His stomach twisted uncomfortably; so she had heard everything. He wondered where she’d been, though it didn’t really matter.

“That’s not the word I would use,” he said, trying to keep his tone from sounding too rude.

“What word would you have used?” she looked over at him.

“It’s not important.”

She gestured to a side hallway to their right and as he followed her, spotting a small staircase at end, rising upwards to the third floor and Will hesitated once more. “Where are we going?”

“To the solarium.”

This time she didn’t wait for him and he hurried up the small twist of stairs, following her down the third floor’s equally uncluttered Center Hallway and up a ramped walkway to a large room that had massive windows filling each wall, allowing in the wash of dawn’s sunlight. Abigail flicked on a light switch and with the room properly lit, the shapes of furniture revealing that they belonged to a grand piano, a harp, three stands that held cased instruments, a harpsichord, and oddly enough, a
theremin.

“Your file says you can play the piano. Will you play something?”

“My file?” he questioned, feeling uncomfortable because he knew exactly what file it was.

“Everyone has a file, Mr Graham,” she said casually.

His eyes narrowed a fraction. “And you’ve read it.”

She shrugged and wrinkled her nose as though the stupidity of the question offended her. “I had to. If you’re going to be my replacement, I need to know what you’re capable of. Play for me?”

He hesitated, but sat down at the piano anyway and began to play the first thing that came to memory.

She listened for only a few notes before stating, “Prelude, Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis 846.”

He smiled slightly, pleased she recognised the song, and continued to play from memory. She wandered around the room, studying the instruments that were most likely from her own family’s collection and his fingers instinctually found the notes, allowing him the chance to watch her walk.

“I play the harp, flute, and harpsichord,” she said conversationally and he nodded; he’d only learned how to play the piano because of a kind neighbor when he’d been ten—his dad had never seen it as a practical skill. Abigail had most certainly been taught her knowledge of instruments at the insistence of her father, a childhood full of tutors and recitals.

He finished that prelude and then segued into another Bach piece, BWV 147, movement 10, ‘Jesu bleibet meine Freude’. His eyes lifted slightly to look at the young woman’s face and found she was smiling at him proudly; his eyes immediately lowered, unsure what had evoked such a reaction from her. His fingers stumbled over a few of the keys and he quickly pulled his hands away.

“I’m not very good.”

“That’s because you’re not used to performing for an audience. I don’t mind if you make mistakes.”

She drifted over to the harp stationed nearby; her hand brushed across the strings of the harp and delicate notes trembled from the catgut.

“Why did your dad request me to be his personal aide?”

She sat down unexpectedly on the bench next to him and turned her head so that she was staring nearly at eye level with him. His throat suddenly tightened and he found he couldn’t remember how to breathe—he did not want to be this close to her. Her eyes didn’t blink.

“He finds you very interesting,” she said with a gentle and patient smile given just for him.

He kept his eyes on the outside edge of her left eyebrow. “I don’t find him that interesting.”

Abigail’s expression remained serene and when she delivered her next words they sounded like a promise, a secret that she wasn’t going to share just yet. “You will.”

At the doorway of the solarium there were footsteps and they both turned their attention to the two men standing there.

“I hope Abigail has been a welcoming hostess to our home,” the President said, his eyes trained on Will.
Will swallowed hard. “She has.”

“He was playing Bach for me,” Abigail announced happily as she hopped off the bench to stand at to her father’s side.

Lecter smiled affectionately at his daughter. “How lovely.” He then looked at Will, eyes flashing red in the early morning light. “Breakfast is ready.”

Will walked behind the First Family and before Jack, watching the way the president held his daughter’s hand to balance her as they descended the shallow steps of the staircase back to the second floor. Somewhere in the back of his mind he found the ease of becoming part of the scene, imagining the feel of his surgeon’s fingers closing over her hand, imagining the feel of having his father’s large hand closing over his smaller one. But the moment was nothing more than a flash of revelation that he quickly pushed away, not wanting his mind to become the ones of the Lecters.

“—though with an exponential increase to the awareness of healthy eating,” the President was finishing as Will snapped back to reality.

“Your gardens,” he blurted out, not wanting any of them to catch on that he had detached for a moment.

Lecter nodded as they left the small side hall and returned to the second floor’s Center Hallway where the president’s three personal agents still lingered, their eyes hawklike. “The official planting date is in four days. I know you are not interested to stand before cameras and while the attention will be focused on Abigail and I, you will have to anticipate your photo being taken as the photographers will want to report that I have a new aide at my side.”

Will stopped dead in his tracks. “You still…”

The President turned to him. “Brilliance desires brilliance, Will. Come Monday at the same time and Abigail shall show you everything you need to know.”

“If I’m not allowed to say ‘no’, ” he said curtly.

“You’re not my hostage, Will.” Lecter said the words so calmly that Will couldn’t help but feel incredibly self-conscious about how he was acting.

While he didn’t directly look at her, Will could see Abigail was offering him that same serene smile from the solarium; concern blossomed in Will, incredibly suspicious of the few minutes away from the president and his chief of staff.

“What did Jack say to convince you to keep asking for me?”

Lecter gave a small tilt of his head. “Jack said nothing.”

Jack shrugged as though he didn’t understand why Lecter was still interested in hiring him either. Will’s nervous tick of fluttering eyelids decided to manifest and he kept his glass frames angled so that the president wouldn’t see it.

“I’ll do it for two weeks. You should find a replacement for me during that time.”

“We’ll see.” Lecter didn’t sound as though he would.

Will straightened his back. “I’ll leave you to your breakfast, then. Good day, Mr President. First Lady Abigail.”
“Goodbye, Mr Graham,” Lecter replied, his lips forming his politician’s smile.

*****

Jack didn’t stay for breakfast either which was all the better in Abigail’s mind. She was dying to talk her father about the man selected to take her job. She leaned on the counter as she watched her father prepare her plate of crepes, meticulously folding them with layers of fruit and sugar; the way he cooked was a marriage of clinical movements and artistic arrangement, both of which she appreciated and acknowledged. She could tell he was thinking of Graham still, distracted from making conversation with her, but she was thinking about him also, so she didn’t make an effort to fill the silence with unnecessary words.

When her father had asked her if she remembered Will Graham, she’d blurted out, ‘of course’, because honestly, he’d been the most interesting person that had travelled on the large charter bus with them last year. She’d secretly spent a good portion of her time watching him, never letting him catch her when he looked up from his laptop (which had been rarely). And she’d been aware that he had watched her, too. It had never been uncomfortable leering or the awkward attempts to catch a glimpse of her scar—it had almost felt as though he was checking up on her, worried. He wasn’t very friendly with the other staffers, choosing to isolate himself when the bus made stops to meet and greet. When she’d asked Jack about him, she’d been told that Will was the finest political strategist to ever exist and she’d laughed—a man that anxious and surly was better suited for her father’s cutting board than his campaign, but Jack assured her that his attitude was worth everything he brought to the election.

She’d been the first person to voice aloud the concern he might be sick; she’d caught him staring at a blank space on the wall, blinking oddly. She’d watched him for a minute before he seemed to return to himself, inhaling deeply and expression shifting to one of confusion as though he didn’t know where he was. She’d told her father about it later that night in their shared hotel room and he’d nodded, informing her that he’d suspected some sort of malaise after noticing the way he’d been sweating and the colour of his skin. She’d been disappointed when he’d subsequently been forced to remain behind in Mobile, Alabama to be treated for encephalitis.

Until last month, Will Graham had simply been a curio in her collection of memories.

Her father handed her the warmed plate and gestured for her to sit at the counter, a rare treat when they were pretending to look like normal people. “Breakfast, my dear.”

“Thank you.” She waited patiently for him to plate his food and when he joined her at the counter, she ceremoniously took the first bite, showing her approval of what he’d cooked—he always liked an audience for his work.

Her father smiled appreciatively and as he cut into a small cut of meat that looked similar to bacon, he asked, “What did you think of him?”

“I like him. He called me First Lady,” she informed him, knowing he’d find it as amusing as she did. “But he was so rude to you. Do you still want him?”

Her father’s smile curled into something befitting a hunter. “Yes.”

A smile eased onto her lips, an odd tilt that spoke of hunger more than happiness. “Okay. Tell me what I need to do.”

*****
In the absolutely silent sanctuary of Number One Observatory Circle, the official home of the Vice President of the United States, stood the mistress of the house—Vice President Bedelia Du Maurier nee Kennedy. It was nearing midnight and she was sipping the last of her wine as she stood in her dressing gown at the landing between the first floor and second. Her eyes moved slightly to the top and left, noting the sound of her private bathroom’s shower being used and the slightest of smirks graced her lips as she returned her attention to the framed art on the walls, admiring the few pieces that she’d brought from her own home.

Bedelia looked at the elegantly drawn family tree a staffer from her days as a senator had presented her. It was something she was especially fond of because it was the proof of her pedigree; proud to see familiar and equally powerful names, her eyes started where they counted most: Bedelia Ponsell Kennedy Du Maurier. Daughter of Governor, later Senator Joseph Patrick Kennedy, Jr and Athalia Ponsell Kennedy. She had been the result of many prayers and lit candles to the Holy Virgin, the only child of the eldest of the Kennedy sibling; being a miracle had meant she had been unexpected—her father had been fifty when she was born, her mother forty-seven. Daddy had been groomed by her grandfather Joe to become U.S. President, but after becoming injured in the second world war by his plane, he’d opted not the carry the mantle and instead became a three time elected governor for Maryland, and then twice elected senator the state as well. In 1990 at the age of seventy-five, he’d been shot and killed by an angry white supremacist, making him the third of the Kennedy Children to be killed in an assassination.

Her eyes moved to the name following her father’s, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the most famous of their clan. She’d been born after his death, so she’d never met America’s golden son, but his political legacy inspired her into politics more than her own father’s had. His late wife, Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy or ‘Aunt Jackie’, had always corresponded with her by letter when she’d attended college, writing down any advice she felt Bedelia might need while she planned her own political career. Bedelia had grown up in the afterglow of their Camelot and she’d sworn that one day she would have a dynasty of her own that held the same breathless wonder. Uncle Jack was the first of the Kennedy Children to be murdered for his beliefs and every time she looked at the crucifix she wore, she saw his face. A glorious martyr for all Americans to kneel before.

After Joseph and John came Rose Marie Kennedy, the eldest sister and the most tragic even by Kennedy standards. Aunt Rosemary, as she’d been known, had suffered the horrible traumas of a failed lobotomy at twenty-three years old; unable to speak clearly or care for herself, she’d been rendered infantile and from 1949 until her recent death in 2005, she’d lived at a facility in Jefferson, Wisconsin. Bedelia had visited her regularly as a child and often as an adult (it made for a dramatic photo op during election time) and never ceased to be amazed by how eager humans were to stick their dirty little fingers in a living brain; Bedelia preferred the subtle art of manipulation, but sharp tools did their job.

The next Kennedy sibling was a sister as well, Kathleen Agnes “Kick” Kennedy Cavendish, Marchioness of Hartington. The black sheep of the siblings, Aunt Kick had died at twenty-eight, long before Bedelia had been born, which caused an odd pang of regret as she was certain Aunt Kick would have been the most fun of her adult relatives. Aunt Kick had fallen in love with the Anglican Marquess of Hartington and heir apparent to the tenth Duke of Devonshire; her father had been the only one to attend Aunt Kick’s wedding in London, as Grandmother Rose had strongly discouraged everyone from attending such a sinful non-Catholic union. Her husband was killed in action four months into their marriage and after a few years, she became involved with the still-married Lord Fitzwilliam. They’d died in a plane crash during a trip to France. Decades later when her father had founded the first free clinic in Baltimore, he’d named it in her memory, “Kathleen Kennedy Memorial Clinic”. Grandmother Rose hadn’t been pleased by that, but secretly no one had cared.
After Aunt Kick had been Eunice Mary Kennedy Shriver, who’d always generously lent her name to Bedelia’s campaigns. Aunt Eunice had taught Bedelia best about the act of charity and Bedelia had of course used the information to create a virtuous, giving image to project to her voters whenever she needed to deflect from some horrid policy she’d had to go along with in the Senate. Aunt Eunice had always been generous and her daughter, Cousin Maria, seemed to have a soft spot for Bedelia that she never hesitated to exploit. God bless her.

Next was Patricia Helen Kennedy Lawford, the sophisticated aunt Bedelia had found too conservative for her own taste, despite sharing so many physical traits and characteristics with her. She’d spent most of her time in California raising her children, fronting a glamorous persona, trying to become an important figurehead in Hollywood, and being an alcoholic. Bedelia and Aunt Patricia had a slightly strained relationship when she’d made a poorly-timed comment about her aunt’s ex-husband, actor Peter Lawford, during a family vacation at the Kennedy Compound one summer. Aunt Patricia didn’t visit the east coast that much afterwards, but that suited Bedelia fine—one less pair of eyes monitoring her could only be good.

Robert Francis Kennedy was the second son slain by an assassin, during his own presidential run; Bedelia actually had a few memories of Uncle Bobby, having been nearly three when he was killed, though they were fuzzy and fairly unimpressive. The last Great Hope of their family for another president, Uncle Bobby had been wonderfully charismatic and strongly dedicated to Civil Rights; she had modeled many of her Senate speeches off his and they had always been met with much applause. Uncle Bobby had been killed far too soon; he would have been missed and honored more by the American public if he’d died after he’d been elected, but Bedelia supposed that it was still a death that added to the Kennedys’ tragedy and mystique.

Jean Ann Kennedy was the last living of the Kennedy Children, which made her a very valuable commodity to Bedelia; Aunt Jean had been an Ambassador to Ireland and had been an intrinsic part of Uncle Jack’s Congressional, Senate, and presidential campaigns, often speaking of the importance of ‘working together for something’, which meant she was always happy to assist Bedelia when needed. Her own organisation, Very Special Arts, had unwittingly provided Bedelia with plenty of photo ops to exploit and yearly she filmed commercials for them to promote both herself and the non-profit affiliate to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, free advertising on both ends, which was only fair. However, one of Aunt Jean’s sons, William, had been subject of a very public rape trial and despite him being acquitted, Bedelia absolutely refused to associate with him—rapists (accused or otherwise) were cancer to a politician and she couldn’t afford to have that near her name. She was always careful never to point this out to her aunt, though.

Edward Moore “Ted” Kennedy was the youngest son of the Kennedys, a very successful senator for Massachusetts and champion for American progressivism. In 1995 when she was thirty, she and Uncle Ted became rather close after she was appointed to fill the seat left open when one of the Maryland Senators whom died in a car accident. They were quite the novelty in Washington, two Kennedys at the same time—uncle and niece. Uncle Ted had helped her perfect her oratorical skills and they were both unabashedly liberal to the point that when he’d earned the nickname ‘The Lion of the Senate’ people had referred to her as ‘The Lioness’. He’d been the one to suggest that she and Hannibal run for the White House in 2009 and before he had died that year, he’d begun to quietly pull support for them among his old friends, cashing in favours to get them the campaign money they needed.

Finally came Aunt Missy, or as she was better known ‘Takako Murasaki Kennedy Lecter’, the adopted tenth child of the Kennedy clan. Aunt Missy had been a diplomat’s daughter and when an escalating political climate in Japan on the eve of World War II made it too dangerous for her to return home at twelve, she’d been left in the care of the Grandmother Rose and Grandfather Joe; Bedelia had never been able to get a straight story as to what had prompted the execution Aunt
Missy’s biological parents by the Japanese government, but she’d been left stranded in a xenophobic America with the nation’s favourite family and the decision had been made that the young girl should be taken in officially among the brood of nine children. She’d been an exotic novelty to the country, but true to Kennedy nature, she’d been accepted without question among the siblings, all eager to have a new younger sister to share their celebrity lives with.

Aunt Missy had been married to Count Robertas Lecter, which Grandmother Rose had been thrilled about; the Lecters were a notoriously Catholic family and had been granted the hereditary title of ‘count’ by the papal see. Grandmother Rose had been named a countess by the papal see herself, so it had been a great honour that child often taunted and not considered a legitimate Kennedy had become a countess as well.

As a child, Bedelia had been able to charm her way into her Aunt Missy’s heart, but by the time she was a teenager, her aunt could see through the human veil she wore so well and became increasingly distant from her, though never rude.

She drew her eyes down to Hannibal’s name, that while unconnected to Aunt Missy and Uncle Robert’s had been placed with theirs; a faint line off the side traced to barely visible names: Mischa Lecter, Edvardas Lecter, Olimpia Lecter. Bedelia knew the names had been written in the muted ashen grey to indicate death, but she’s always appreciated the choice in ink because it made the names look as though they didn’t really belong there. Which they didn’t—this was a family tree for Kennedys’ only.

She and Hannibal were the youngest of the Kennedy’s fourth generation, only a few month apart in age, and once they had met one another, they’d become inseparable to the point they were often referred to as ‘the twins’ despite their relationship having no shared biological traits. All her other cousins had all been much older than her for the most part, but that had suited her own agenda best. She’d always liked Hannibal most, anyway.

Beneath Hannibal’s name was the name of the girl she thought of as her own niece, her own investment in the future. Abigail’s name was written simply as “Abigail Eunice Fitzgerald Lecter”, not “Abigail Maureen Hobbs”; Bedelia sipped her wine and once again confirmed that she much preferred Abigail’s name now—her previous identity seemed far too common, too tainted by Garret Jacob Hobbs. Upon her adoption, Abigail had elected to take on a new name and the remaining members of the Kennedys had thrilled she wanted to embrace the legacy she’d have to live up to, picking middle names that paid homage to two of the family’s most beloved women: Grandmother Rose and Aunt Eunice. Of course two middle names wasn’t exactly traditional, but no one faulted her liking them both and every Christmas she had been flooded with items that held her full AEFL monogram; it was almost an invocation that ensured she would never, ever be a Hobbs again. She belonged to the Kennedys now.

They’d thrown a party for Abigail that particular winter to celebrate the new year together as a new and further expanded family. She’d been introduced to everyone and fawned over, and Abigail had accepted the ordeal with grace and patience that immediately endured her to everyone’s heart, their eyes lingering nervously on the scarves that covered the still healing scar on her neck. Hannibal had been so proud of his daughter and trophy and Bedelia had felt a smug satisfaction that everyone’s happiness was because of her own very careful political string pulling. But that was what family did for one another and she was a Kennedy at heart—Kennedys certainly loved their families.

Bedelia’s smile faded.

Sometimes Bedelia wondered if the family forgot that Hannibal hadn’t actually been Aunt Missy’s son, that they hadn’t actually been twins, that he hadn’t really ever been a Kennedy. He’d been a
wolf amidst a pack of blind lambs and while she’d always been blood thirsty and cruel, she never hunted the way he did; her prey wasn’t there for her enjoyment but for her career. Hannibal’s prey was…well, she didn’t want to think about food.

The first summer he’d been at the Kennedy Compound she’d spent days lurking in the hedges to watch him. So sullen, so broken. She’d always wanted a living thing to play with (the pets didn’t count) and he was there waiting to be used. After a few weeks, she’d been unable to keep her patience and approached him wandering in Aunt Missy’s garden, luring him back with her to a tea party she’d set up in her parents’ garden. He’d been distant and unresponsive to anything she’d said and she’d found that frustrating; from there her statements became bolder and bolder to catch his attention until she’d confessed her best quality to him:

“I have no pity.”

And his eyes had looked up from his tea cup and she’d shared her true smile with him, wanting him to understand that it was okay if he didn’t like her back, she just wanted someone to spend hours with. His eyes had softened and she’d felt relief that he’d understood, that he’d accepted their new relationship. She had poured more tea into her cup and continued with her conversation about her mother’s boat and her father’s upcoming election, satisfied with herself for finding someone she could call hers.

Her eyes scanned over her own name once more and while she’d never admitted it aloud, she wished she could warn her nine-year old self about what she had been toying with. A relationship with Hannibal had bought her very little in the long run.

‘Oh you naive little girl.’ she thought to herself. ‘You thought you had won freedom, and all you’d really done was make yourself a prison.’

Everyone made their own coffin; Hannibal would simply be the nails in hers.

Footsteps descended the stairs and Bedelia turned to look at the dressed and freshly showered staffer she’d taken home with her this particular night. She smiled and the staffer smiled back; he was young and eager to please, not made to think but to serve. He leaned in shy to kiss her on her cheek and she returned the gesture, then walked with him to the front door where an agent waited to unlock it and escort the man home.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Madam Vice President.”

She nodded, giving the appearance of relaxed contentment. “Goodnight.”

The staffer smiled, even blushed as he was led outside. “Goodnight.”

Her house now empty of civilians, Bedelia climbed the steps back up to her bedroom, her eyes lingering on the family tree one last time. Written in faded grey was a name beside hers, Benjamin Singh Du Maurier. She studied the name as long as she could until the ringing in her ears became the sound of someone choking on their own tongue, then continued upwards into the house. Yes, it was a very good life.

///***///

Residence ground floor:
Residence First Floor:
Residence Second Floor:
Residence Third Floor:
West Wing Ground Floor:
West Wing First Floor:
West Wing Second Floor:

East Wing First Floor:
East Wing Second Floor:
Chapter End Notes

White House floor plans from http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/
A very educational and interesting site!
'This is glorified babysitting. I will be babysitting a grown man,' Will thought to himself as he exhaled sharply and fidgeted with his glasses yet again as he walked up to the first check point in the Residency.

He’d already made the requisite trip to the Secret Service’s Residence office where he’d been given rules and ordinances to follow along with more classified papers to sign; Will was very aware that his entrance into the White House was being rushed as he should have been subject to an updated background check that should have taken at least a week, so this was either a special order or it had been in the works for a while. Either way, he was relieved it was one last thing for him to deal with. He’d been issued an ID badge to wear on the front of his jacket and a secure Blackberry phone that would be used for storing the information he’d have to collect; it didn’t matter that he had a near perfect memory or that he wasn’t really someone who texted—Blackberrys were protocol.

Last night a Secret Service agent had arrived at Wolf Trap to inform him that he would have a detail until Clarice Starling’s murder was solved and that he’d be escorted to the White House in the morning. Will had allowed the man, Agent Hough, into his house to get acquainted with the dogs and go over the plan for ‘staying safe’. This morning he’d met Agent Courtney who switched shifts with Hough and he’d driven with both agents tailing him back to Washington DC. It seemed the President wanted him at breakfast again and Will begrudgingly accepted. He didn’t want to be friends—he just wanted to get this job over with so he could return to teaching.

Behind the metal detector of the check point stood Abigail, looking incredibly formal for this early in the morning. “Hi, Will. Dad’s making breakfast so I thought I’d bring you up.”

“Good morning, First Lady.” Will’s eyes shifted to the very large and physically imposing man that stepped out from behind the young Lecter.

“I’m Agent Barney Matthews, Miss Lecter’s shadow,” the agent said, his voice remarkably kind and quiet.

Will accepted the agent’s hand, feeling slightly more at ease that the man wasn’t one of the Secret Service agents that had too much testosterone and a need to throw his weight around. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Will Graham.”

“Shall we head upstairs?” Abigail asked and Will nodded.

“You look very nice this morning,” he offered after an awkward silence and immediately wondered if that was an appropriate thing to say to a First Lady, especially one that was the President’s daughter.

But she merely smiled at him. “Thanks. I have to go speak at Sidwell later; every year they invite alumni to talk to the students about current domestic issues and they asked for me.”

Will recalled that she had attended Sidwell Friends School and turned his head so it looked like he was making eye contact. “What will you be speaking about?”

“The importance of literacy programmes in correctional facilities,” she replied with such a casual air that she truly sounded like a seventeen year old instead of a First Lady; the statement even seemed to blend into her nonchalant question. “Do you like scrambled eggs? That’s what Dad’s making this morning.”
“Yeah, it’s fine,” he replied too quickly, because what the fuck did he care what the president was cooking? Food was food.

He could see she had raised an eyebrow, doubting his sincerity. “If it isn’t, I can tell him and he’ll make something else.”

“It’s fine. It’s—who doesn’t like scrambled eggs?” he asked almost defensively.

“I’m glad you’re not picky then.” They reached the landing of the second floor. “While Dad’s cooking, I could give you a tour?”

Not exactly eager to see the President, Will picked her offer. “Okay.”

Touching her elbow gently, Agent Matthews leaned in. “Miss Lecter, I’ll see you when we’re ready to leave.”

“See you then.” She and Agent Matthews shared warm smiles and then she led Will to the Yellow Oval Room.

“This is the Yellow Room. We only use it for formal receptions,” she said, looking very much the woman of the house. He studied the expensive furniture for a few counts before she changed the course of their conversation in the abrupt manner that she made so natural. “The morning for us starts about five thirty. That’s when breakfast is scheduled. And you’re totally welcome to eat with us.” He offered no response and after a brief pause in which she watched him, she turned her attention to a painting of ‘The Honey Fitz’ and continued. “Seven is when the day begins officially. You can have either Saturday or Sunday off, so long as it works with Dad’s scheduling. Chances are you’ll have weeks without any days off. Will that cause a problem?”

He shook his head, his eyes focusing on the pattern of a birdseye maple side table. “No.”

In his peripheral vision he saw her shrug. “I don’t have much of a social life, either. At seven, you go through the checkpoints and you meet Dad up here in his study.”

She motioned for him to follow her through a set of side doors. The next room was suddenly far more personal from the rest of the Residency that Will had seen. Framed by the large ceiling to floor windows his left was a large tiger maple desk, the style sophisticated and minimalist, bearing only a lamp and large sheets of vellum that all seemed to have pencil sketches of various architecture on them. Above the fireplace was an oil painting of President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline; it wasn’t the official portrait the White House commissioned, but Will found it very familiar looking, though he decided not to dwell on it at this point in time. In carefully arranged frames on the mantle were family photos, all focusing on Abigail, occasionally including Hannibal Lecter. A few magazines were neatly stacked on the coffee table and a pink cardigan was draped over the arm of one chair.

Abigail seemed to be waiting for his attention and Will quickly nodded for her to continue, eyes carefully not meeting hers. “The two of you will go over your schedule for the day and you’ll gather up the things you need to take with you, especially if you’re headed out. He keeps everything he likes to read on his work iPad, but I bring along a few of his favourite magazines. *French Vogue*, *John Hopkins Magazine*, um…*Valsybė, Veidas, Harper’s Bazaar, Conde Nut Traveller*…oh! Always, always, always bring his latest copy of *Lituanus*. You should read it, too—it’s in English. Really interesting stuff. Then you can both talk about the articles.” She smiled and gestured to the neat stack of magazines on the coffee table. “So just grab one or two, except if you’re going on a plane trip, when you should just bring the fashion ones. I think he prefers to look at the photography when he’s flying.”
Will nodded, finding any discussion of Hannibal Lecter’s reading interests insipid. “Understood. Will he be quizzing me on this, too?”

He got the distinct impression she was giving his clothes a once over. “No.”

He did note her smile was slightly teasing as she moved around him to go to the desk, where she opened the top left side drawer and removed two sleek leather cases of different sizes. “Here’s his music iPod—all of his favourite music is on it. And here’s his media iPad. It has all the videos on it. I know it seems excessive, but there’s a lot of stuff to keep track of.”

Will accepted the two portables from her and he found himself slipping into a different mindset. “He watches his opponents speeches as well as his own.”

Abigail’s eyes widened a fraction. “Yes. How did you know?”

“It’s what I would do.”

Her smile returned, this time approving. “They all have different passwords, but they’re all related, so it’s easy to remember them. The work iPad is 0235, the media iPad is 7911, and the iPod—“

“1317. They’re prime numbers. Except zero.”

Her smile became a grin. “Right. Now, when you get down to your desk, you’ll be given a Blackberry to work with. You’ve already been briefed on data and security, so the Secret Service agent that talks to you will really just give you a quick check to make sure you remember protocol. Then Alana will meet up with you around lunch time to sync schedules.”

Abigail opened her mouth to start talking about, but Will quickly interrupted her. “Alana Bloom?”

“Yeah, Aunt Bee’s PA. You know her.” It wasn’t a question, but a statement that hinted young Miss Lecter knew how he felt for Ms Bloom; Will felt stupid he was so obvious that a seventeen year old would know how fond he was of the other woman.

“Why do I have to meet with her? Isn’t this something that can be done by email? Or phone?” He shifted uncomfortably.

“Alana’s just going to see if you understand it; that’s all.” Her lips nearly tilted into a smirk, but she quickly tucked the expression away, gesturing to two large oak doors on the west wall. “Now, those doors lead to Dad’s bedroom. You’re probably not going to have to get anything from here too often, but you can never be too prepared.” She led him through the twin doors into a spacious and elegant bedroom that could only be fit for a president. She gestured to the nightstand closest to them with a flick of her wrist. “Nightly briefings end up here, sometimes his files and reports. This way to the dressing room.”

They walked through another set of doors into an unexpectedly empty and stripped room that was at the end of the Residence; wallpaper had been torn off the walls and plastic drop cloths were haphazardly strewn on the floor. The air smelt of new drywall and wood sealant and the windows lacked curtains, so the room was aglow with the earliest of Monday morning light, March’s dawn flooding onto them.

“Remodeling?” he asked, wondering why the room would be in this state; Lecter didn’t strike him as someone who would allow a room in his house remain in this state for long.

“Well, it would be cool to have a giant walk in closet, but Dad and I have top secret plans for it.” She offered him a sly smile before turning toward another passageway, leading him through it.
“Bathroom to your left and back into the hallway. Let’s say hi to Dad and I’ll show you where we keep things in the kitchen.”

Nodding, he trailed behind her at a respectable distance, catching lingering hints of her citrusy perfume. In the kitchen stood the president, chopping tomatoes and herbs at the counter as small slices of of sausage browned in a copper-bottomed pan.

“Good morning, President Lecter,” Will greeted politely, his stomach lurching at the sudden hunger he felt.

The president looked up at him and smiled, equally polite. “Good morning, Will. I hope you are ready for breakfast?”

“I am. How are you?” He hated these niceties, because they only highlighted how much he didn’t fit in.

But if Lecter noticed, he didn’t let on. “I’m well. I trust Abigail is being informative of your duties?”

Will offered a weak smile to the young woman. “She is.”

Abigail beamed back at him and continued with her instructions to him. “The ushers will pack any food that needs to be brought along, so you don’t have to worry about that. They’ll have it ready and waiting right here on the counters in an insulated envelope. Mr Pascal—the usher in charge of our food arrangements—will show you when you need to take one.”

Will could feel the president’s eyes on him and he shifted his shoulders in defense, wanting to hide behind something. He settled on rubbing at the back of his neck with his calloused fingers. Abigail continued to flit around the expensive kitchen, motioning to a black ceramic vessel resting beside the sink.

“Oh! And here’s his thermos. Normally he takes this down to his office himself, but he might ask you to refill. It’s just the blend from this canister. I’ve written down the seeping instructions on this sticky note until you get the hang of it.” She opened one of the cabinets above the sink to point to a stainless steel canister that had a bright yellow post-it taped on the front.

“Thank you,” he murmured, grateful he wasn’t going to have to figure that end of it out; of course Lecter wouldn’t settle for water heated in the microwave and a dusty bag of tea tossed into it afterwards.

“No problem.” She paused alongside her father and looked up at him. “Do you want me to help you with that, Dad?”

He stood aside and handed over the knife he’d been using to chop the tomatoes. “I would appreciate it.”

Will hovered uncomfortably until Lecter gestured to one of the sophisticated bar stools stationed around the counter. “Please, sit.”

Will felt incredibly out of place in this sophisticated setting and he settled his eyes on a wire basket filled with oranges. Somewhere in the back of his mind he thought about the fact that the President had to pay for all the food in the White House, a very expensive obligation and he remembered during a stop in Ohio last year, Lecter had stood on a stage in front of almost seven thousand people and announced, “There is no reason with my own personal assets I would need to accept the salary the president is paid. To be the President of the United States is a commitment—a duty. I could not accept money in return for my service to this wonderful nation. When I am elected, I will
immediately donate my four years of income to the Meals on Wheels Association of America.” As a result, then-President Chilton had been forced to defend why he wouldn’t be doing the same thing with his second term’s $1.6 million; to be fair, Lecter lived off two very sizable inheritances but Chilton’s decision still hadn’t been well received by the American people. The matter was viewed as another example of the Chilton Administration’s greed and lack of sympathy towards the people he needed to vote for him and had been one of the many hurdles the 45th president’s reelection campaign had failed to clear.

“Thinking of something amusing, Will?” Lecter’s voice brought Will out of his thought and he realised he’d been almost smiling.

Will shook his head quickly and put his focus on the cup of coffee that had been set before him. “It’s nothing.”

He glanced towards the back of the kitchen, eyes settling on the refrigerator door where a few watercolour paintings were held with magnets. They were beautifully done and each carefully arranged, a small gallery among the food.

Lecter’s eyes followed his and he announced, “Abigail painted those.”

Will nodded to the teenager. “They’re very good.”

“Thank you. They’re—they’re not as good as Dad’s, but I was pretty happy with them.” She gave a slight shrug as she abandoned the chopped tomatoes to place more slices of toast on an already over-stacked plate.

“I wouldn’t be able to find the flaws,” Will admitted, and quickly identified what she had chosen as her subjects. “Your house in Baltimore. Sidwell’s front entrance.” The third one took him a moment and he almost kicked himself when he realised how obvious it was. “The one on the bottom is the Kennedy compound.”

“It’s the view from Lady Murasaki’s old home. We visit in the summer.” Abigail gave a small huff. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to this year. Might get stuck at Camp David.”

Lecter’s expression betrayed no humour, but his eyes did as they shifted from his daughter. “I hope you are hungry, Will. I’ve made a protein scramble to start the day. Let us eat in the dining room.”

Will stood up from the counter quickly. “Can I carry anyth—“

Abigail didn’t allow him to speak. “You’re our guest. Go sit.”

Will wanted to protest, but he was keenly aware of how pointless it would be, so he walked through the side doors into the golden and bright private dining room. He picked a seat that would allow him to have his back to the walls and face the doors in the event he needed to exit quickly—he could already see himself fucking this breakfast up and having to get out before he embarrassed himself further. Lecter and Abigail both sat opposite across from him, at complete ease as they placed the food on the already set table. Will watched in silence as Lecter poured freshly brewed coffee from a well polished turkish coffee pot into the small cups set at their three place settings.

Lecter gestured to Will. “Let’s eat.”

Will was slightly surprised that the Lecters didn’t say grace before eating, but he didn’t really care either way; he was hungry and he wasn’t Catholic. He took a bite of the sausage, fragrant fennel seeds and ground white pepper filling his mouth and the succulent fat it had been cooked in coated
his tongue. It was delicious.

Lecter smiled and began to eat his breakfast as well. “Good?”

“Very good,” Will admitted, spearing eggs onto his fork.

Abigail looked proud. “We make the sausage ourselves.”

Will nodded, his mind immediately conjuring images that had been shown briefly last year of the two Lecters in camouflage with rifles. “I remember. You’re both hunters.”

“Do you hunt, Mr Graham?” Abigail asked.

He shook his head. “I fish.”

“I’ve never fished,” she admitted as she took a piece of toast from the plate at the centre of the table.

“It is a practice that requires a lot of patience, much like our hunting,” Lecter offered, then looked at him. “What type of fishing do you prefer, Will?”

“Fly fishing.” Then with a bit of afterthought, he added, “I make my own lures.”

The president smiled. “An excellent discipline.”

There was a small beep from Abigail’s side of the table and she quickly pulled out a cellphone, checking the screen. “Sorry. It’s Mrs Madchen. May I please be excused?”

Lecter nodded. “Hurry back. I don’t want your food to get cold.”

She gave him a relieved smile. “Thank you.”

Lecter stood as his daughter left the table and Will quickly mirrored the president; they sat down once more as they were left alone in the dining room, Abigail’s voice contained within the kitchen. Will, nervous that Lecter might try to pick a topic of conversation to fill the silence, spoke.

“That’s her chief of staff?”

“Yes. I believe Abigail is making arrangements for next month’s Easter egg roll on the Front Lawn.”

“That’s a lot of responsibility for a seventeen year old,” Will commented admiringly.

Lecter looked pleased. “She handles it well. I will miss her when she leaves for university.”

“Has she decided where she wants to go?”

Lecter tilted his head to the side, almost frowning. “No. She is still deciding what profession she would like to pursue. My career path has not been very sympathetic to her own needs, unfortunately. She’s had to accommodate my interests before her own and it has left her own decisions for her future to the wayside.”

Will frowned as he took a piece of toast, placing it on the corner of his plate. The thought that Lecter hadn’t prepared for his daughter’s own future because he was busy furthering his own career didn’t fit in with Lecter’s carefully polished and organised life; Will decided to catalogue the thought for later review. He investigated the coffee that had been poured for him and found it was sweet and heavily spiced with cloves and cardamom; it complimented the sausage quite well and Will decided that he would not be turning down anymore invitations to breakfast.
As Abigail reentered the room, she quickly said, “You don’t have to stand.” She sat down and put her napkin back in her lap, giving an explanation to her father before returning to her food. “I decided that we should invite families with same-sex and transgendered parents to the egg roll, to coincide with your signing of the marriage equality bill last week. I know we talked about military families…”

“Your decision was a good one, Abigail,” Lecter praised. “We can invite military families for the Mother’s Day and Father’s Day celebrations in May and June.”

“Okay.” She smiled at the President and Will felt as though he was watching the sun come from behind the clouds, averting his eyes as she turned to apologise to him. “Sorry I left.”

“You’re busy,” he said, shaking his head; she didn’t ever need to apologise to him for something she had to do.

“Will and I were just talking about what you would like to do when you go to university,” her father said amicably.

Abigail’s smile became amused and she took her cup of coffee. “Did he tell you how I’ve been dragging my feet to make a decision?”

“I said no such thing,” Lecter insisted, his smile playful as well.

“I’m kidding.” Abigail looked at Will once more. “He blames himself for me not having made up my mind yet. I’m happy being First Lady, though. I’m just going to stick with that until I’ve got my head figured out. It’s going to look great on my resume.”

“You’re not thinking about politics?” Will asked, stacking some of the egg and chopped tomatoes onto a piece of toast.

“Not…really my forte. I’m a better politician’s daughter than a politician.” She gave an embarrassed laugh. “And is this your dream job? Working in politics?”

Will shook his head. “I’d be very happy to just work on boat motors.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, really? Why?”

“Boat motors have straightforward problems with straightforward answers. And if something’s too ruined, you can just throw it away.”

“And you can’t do that with a politician,” Lecter said with a smile as though he found the topic witty.

“No, you cannot,” Will agreed before indulging in more of the coffee.

There was a noise behind Will that caused him to jump, nearly spilling his coffee down the front of his shirt. A concealed door had opened and from it stepped a young woman in her twenties wearing a plum coloured suit. Abigail was first to greet her.

“Hello, Miss Madchen.”

“Good morning, First Lady. Good morning, President Lecter.” She offered polite nods to everyone at the table.

Lecter dabbed at the corner of his mouth with his napkin. “Good morning, Miss Madchen. I don’t
believe you’ve met Will Graham.”

Will stood up from the table, scraping his chair’s legs loudly on the floor as he held out his hand, which she took delicately. Will noted that the skin on her right hand was oddly scarred as though the skin had been peeled off at some point, but he was careful not to stare.

Miss Madchen smiled, an expression slightly lopsided but kind. “No, I haven’t. Hello, I’m Georgia Madchen, the First Lady’s assistant.”

“Madchen? Are you related to Jocelyn Madchen?” he asked.

She nodded, now looking proud. “She’s my mom. And you are?”

“President Lecter’s temporary personal aide.”

Miss Madchen raised an eyebrow. “Temporary?”

“I’m on a two week loan,” Will explained, feeling the eyes of the Lecters watching him hawkishly.

She seemed unsure what to make of the information, but remained friendly. “Oh, well if you need any advice or help, I’ll be happy to give it.”

He sat back in his chair. “Thank you.”

Miss Madchen turned her attention to Abigail, handing over the the file in her hands. “The finalised speech, Miss Lecter.”

Abigail placed the file beside her plate. “Thank you, Miss Madchen.”

Miss Madchen gave Will one last friendly smile before excusing herself, exiting out the same disguised door behind him. The rest of breakfast passed with Will quietly listening to Abigail and the President talk about sailing up in Cape Cod during the summer. To his relief they didn’t try to force him to converse; while he enjoyed all his experiences with boats, they for the most part hadn’t been leisure, and they certainly hadn’t been aboard New England’s finest sailing vessels. He’d only ever known trawlers and tugs.

When their breakfast concluded, Will carried his coffee cup into the kitchen as Abigail had taken the three dirty plate. He eyed the remaining pieces of toast and considered sneaking one to eat later, but immediately reminded himself that he was in the White House and he wasn’t a fucking animal.

As Abigail carried the dirty plates back to the kitchen, she murmured to her father, “I still need to take him down to his office.”

The President accepted the plates, moving them to the sink. “I can clear the rest of the table without you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to apologise for,” her father assured her, squeezing her shoulder.

Will thanked the President once more for breakfast, following after Abigail. She showed him the various historic rooms on the first floor of the Residence in brief overview; it seemed so surreal to be looking at everything up close, as he had only visited the White House on two previous occasions and both were organised tours when he’d first began working in DC. Abigail didn’t lecture him with boring trivia or facts that he already knew, just made passing commentary about what event would
be scheduled in the locations during the rest of the week. When it came to journeying to the West Wing, she led him to the Palm Room.

“I’ll take you the scenic route,” she offered with a smile. “Normally you could just go out the front, around to the West Wing’s lobby and get in through that way.”

Together they walked though the Palm Room and Abigail greeted the Marine holding the door to the West Colonnade open for them. Abigail’s shoe heels made sharp clicks on the outdoor walkway with every step she took and in the back of Will’s mind, he registered that the noise was considered pleasurable to certain parts of the brain and they’d made sure to take advantage of it anytime someone walked across a stage during the campaign. Thankfully Jack had taken his advice not to try to make Lecter look like anything other than the stylish politician he was, so the dress shoes he wore remained.

At the door leading into the Oval Office, Abigail paused in front of the second Marine standing watch. “Hi, this is Will. He’s Dad’s new aide.”

The Marine nodded, though his face remained entirely neutral, looking past Will and Abigail even as Abigail led them inside.

“Here’s Dad’s office and if we come through here,” she said as they walked briskly past the iconic desk and over the seal of the United States president embedded in the carpet, and through a doorway that led to a small corridor, “this is your office.”

She stopped in front of a oak door on the lefthand side of the hall that had a small tasteful, but simple placard that stated ‘Will Graham, Assistant to the President’.

Will paused as she opened the door and walked in. “This is the President’s study.”

“Dad wanted you to have your own space,” she said, coming to stand by a leather armchair that had been positioned between two ceiling high bookcases.

He stepped into the office tentatively, mapping the space out in his mind. “He doesn’t work in here?”

“No. He wants to sit where the president sits. If he needs privacy, he’ll just empty the Oval Office.” He must have made a face and her demeanor took on edges of anxiousness to quickly explain. “He knew you wouldn’t want to be stationed out at Clarice’s old desk in the secretary’s office. It’s pretty busy out there. This way you can lock your door and just be alone.” Her fingers came to rest on the soft leather of the armchair. “If you want different furniture or want something removed, you can call the maintenance department and they’ll have it taken care of by the end of the day. This is your office now—you can do anything in here that you want.”

“Will, settling in?”

They both turned to look at Jack, who was grinning in the doorway. For a moment Will thought he saw Abigail’s eyes become stormy at the sight of the Chief of Staff interrupting them, but a happy smile quickly appeared on her face as she said,

“Just showing him, Uncle Jack.”

“Great, great.” Jack pointed enthusiastically to the door. “Did you see the nameplate?”

Once again, the young Lecter saved him from having to speak. “I was giving him a tour. Just about to show him the dining room.” As Jack started to open his mouth to continue to talk to him, Abigail interrupted. “Now’s probably the best time to talk to Dad; he’s washing dishes.”
Jack looked exasperated and quickly turned to find the President, loudly complaining, “Why does he do that? There is a dish washer in the kitchen for Christ’s sake.”

She relaxed considerably as they waited for Jack to leave and from there, she directed him to a small dining area at the end of the Oval Office’s private corridor. “This is where we have lunch. You’re welcome to join me and Dad, if you want to.”

“Oh, I…” he thought of a very humble bologna and cheese sandwiched he’d packed for himself and slipped into his messenger bag that morning.

“Actually, Dad would like you to,” she rephrased and Will nodded resolutely, seeing he had no choice in the matter.

They exited out of the right door (“President Bush had the left one locked into a stationary position.”) and she motioned to the French doors adjacent. Together they looked inside to the unlit room, able to see the vague outlines of chairs and a large conference table.

“This is the Roosevelt Room and back that way,” she gestured to her right, “takes you to Dad’s office. We’ll come back this way in a moment.” They continued westward and he memorised the nameplates to the different doors they were passing. “Offices to Dad’s senior advisors,” Abigail explained. At the end of the west wall was a large oak door with gilded lettering declaring ‘Office of the Chief of Staff’ and beneath it on a name plate said ‘Jack Crawford. They entered the office which had been divided up with various desks. A sole staffer sat at one of the desk, eating a cruller and leaning over a laptop; he paid them no attention and Abigail led him over to Jack’s actual quarters. “We can take a look while he’s bothering my Dad.” She led him inside Jack’s office, showing him the desk shoved against the wall to make room for a large table surrounded by very uncomfortable chairs. “Dad has a lot of meetings in here and he sits at the head of the table.”

“Naturally,” Will commented.

“You’ll want to sit here.” She motioned to chair off to the side of the President’s.

“What do I do?”

“Pretend you’re not listening and afterwards discuss whatever the meeting was about.”

Will’s brow furrowed. “Isn’t that really a job for an advisor?”

“Dad doesn’t keep people around him that lack brains to pick.” She shook her head at his obvious discomfort. “You’ll do fine. You’re brilliant. Everyone knows that.”

Leaving Jack’s office, they walked to a door diagonal to the one they exited, this one labeled, ‘The Office of the Vice President’. Will was immediately bombarded with the ringing of phones and the drone of staffers as Abigail opened the door.

“Is Aunt Bee in?” she asked the closest standing aide.

The man covered the phone’s mouthpiece. “She’s preparing for this morning’s press conference. Strict orders not to let anyone in.”

Abigail frowned, her eyes still locked on the door to the Vice President’s office. “I’ll introduce you later, then.”

Entering behind them was a statuesque woman in white, one of the administration’s best known employees, Bella Crawford. She was the current White House Press Secretary, well spoken and
incredibly patient with the obnoxious press that seemed constantly on the prowl for something ugly
to say, no matter how much they liked the President.

“Good morning, Abigail.”

“Good morning, Mrs Crawford.”

“Mrs Crawford,” Will greeted politely.

The Press Secretary offered out a hand, giving him a firm handshake. “Good morning, Mr Graham.
How are you?”

“Fine.”

She looked at him curiously. “Jack tells me you’re here for your first day of work.”

“Yes.”

“Well, we’re glad to have you here.” Will tried to return her smile. “If you’ll both excuse me, I need
to meet with Bedelia.”

Abigail and Will offered polite nods as Mrs Crawford continued to the office; as they left, Abigail
 navigated them around the employees starting to show up for work, having him flash his badge to
 various agents stationed in disguised checkpoints. The office tucked farthest at the end of the hallway
 had a very small placard on the doorway and Abigail barely spared it a glance.

“She had a grim look in her eyes. “Right. They’re dying to get you.”

She pointed next to a distinct room that was actually very recognisable to Will. “That’s the Cabinet
Room. You’ll have a lot of meetings in there. Now, during meetings in here, you’ll sit behind Dad
 and you can whisper advice into his ear or give him notes with your recommendations. I mostly read
 back details from supplementary files, but you would be good at fact checking or people-reading.
Whatever you think would help him in a discussion.”

Will had wanted the question to sound natural, but it seemed cautious instead. “What did Clarice
do?”
“She thought up counterpoint arguments.” Abigail’s eyes were distant then she recovered and took him to a staircase tucked out of the way. “This way to the subfloors.”

The descended the steps together and she gestured to various nondescript doors that lined the hallway they found themselves in. “Secret Service headquarters. If you ever need to talk to an agent, you should go to the office in the residence, though. They try to keep everyone away from here. Lots of offices. Homeland security, photo office, and here’s the lobby. Hi, Maha.”

A man sitting at a checkpoint station smiled at them. “Good morning, Abigail.”

“This is Will Graham, Dad’s new assistant,” she introduced.

“Good to meet you,” the other man said, shaking Will’s hand with enthusiasm.

Will wondered how many personnel actually were glad to meet him for novelty’s sake. “Hello.”

Abigail straightened a floral centrepiece on a side table before continuing down yet another corridor. “And down here are the kitchen, Navy mess hall, and the Situation Room.” She stopped at the door to the Situation Room. “They don’t let aides in the Situation Room. We don’t have clearance. When you’re locked out because Dad’s in there, just find something else to do; sessions last a minimum of an hour.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Want to go see my office?”

Will smiled at her eagerness and allowed himself to be led from the West Wing to the East and up to the large space that was her office; small cubicles and various desks were stationed around the room and on the south wall was a very impressive desk that obviously was Abigail’s. Georgia Madchen was there and introduced him to another young woman named Beth Lebeau, the First Lady’s Secretary; both invited him to join them for lunch later, but Abigail quickly informed them that he would be having lunch with her and her father in the West Wing. Will did agree to take a raincheck in the end. As Abigail continued to introduce him to her staffers, he wondered if she was annoyed that people were paying more attention to him than to her, or if she didn’t want his attention on anyone else but her. He wouldn’t consider it brattish behaviour, but defensive, protecting her interests. It was a side of her he hadn’t seen before, but it wasn’t entirely unexpected.

When they walked back to his own working quarters on the other side of the building, she informed him with a certain level of smugness that First Lady Cindy McCain had left the office in various shades of light pink and Will commented that it was definitely more sophisticated now with its palette of cream and red to mimic the Oval Office. He watched her carefully; she was small and tender looking, but he could tell that her mind was sharper than most and she was very much in control of who she was (whoever she was). Will could picture her as a powerful political leader twenty, thirty years from now and he said a silent prayer to the empty heavens that she wouldn’t pick that path. There was no need to warp someone like her.

Once in his office, she made small talk about various meetings that would be held later that week and that she couldn’t wait for the photo shoot in the White House’s new vegetable garden, all the time straightening the books on the shelves; he wondered if she had a compulsion as the books were already perfectly organised. He gave quiet and careful answers to her questions (“No, I don’t have a garden.” “I like lettuce more than spinach.” “I didn’t know tomatoes could be purple, but I have had them green.”) and when Agent Matthews showed up to take her to the motorcade, he did find himself disappointed that she wouldn’t be a buffer anymore for him that day.

“Good luck with your speech,” he told her and she grinned at him.

“Thank you.”
She shut the door behind her and he shoved his hands into his pockets, unsure what to do with himself. Sitting down at the desk which contained both a laptop and desktop computer, a phone with numerous buttons for all the extensions it contained, a printer and scanner, a power strip with a charger for the Blackberry he’d been issued that morning, and four inboxes, Will sighed softly; he’d promised two weeks and he’d be good to his word. Tucked between the inboxes and the phone was a mint julep cup that held a cluster of blue pens that had the White House seal printed cheaply on the barrel; if his dad was still alive, he’d sneak a few out to give to him. The corner of his mouth twitched slightly in a sad smile that quickly disappeared with the knock at the office door. He stood from his desk and called out in too loud a voice,

“Come in.”

The door opened and Lecter entered.

“You don’t have to ask to come into your own office,” Will said uncomfortably, eyes returning to the mint julep cup; he decided that Jack had left it for him, because it really wasn’t the president’s style.

“It’s your office,” the president countered and Will’s brow knotted; he hated that everyone was thinking on such permanent terms.

“I hope you don’t think it presumptuous of me to change the painting in your office,” Lecter continued.

He gestured up to a large oil painting above the armchair between the bookcases, then clasped his hands behind him. Will blinked twice and tilted his head to get a better angle at which to look at painting.

“Thank you. You didn't have to.” He took a step forward, his eyes taking in every detail. It was a simple seascape with a small, but recognisable tug boat. “Where did you find this?”

“The White House is gifted many pieces of art and most do not get the opportunity to be shown. This one is a Charles Napier Hemy, given to Gerald Ford in the first year of his administration; from what I understand, it was never displayed here, but kept in storage for all these years. Now it shall reside in here with you.”

Will turned towards Lecter, though still avoided eye contact. “It’s, um…thanks.”

“My pleasure, Will.” Lecter gave him a humble nod and then turned his attention back to the door. “I shall be in my office. I will see you in a few hours.”

“Oh kay,” he said lamely and the door shut behind the president, once again leaving him alone.

Will sat down heavily in chair behind the desk and sighed, rubbing his temples. What the hell was he doing here?

*****

Abigail had attended Sidwell Friends School from the age of eight up until her graduation at sixteen; it was the school of choice for the children of political elite and when she’d first been ready to return to school, she’d come with the recommendations of her Senator aunt (Sidwell alumni) and her Governor father (newly elected). It was filled with many fond memories—perfect grades, charity bake sales, hours spent in crew, Chinese Language Club meetings, music tutoring, and Marissa. As she sat in the backseat of the motorcade, she drummed her fingers mindlessly across her knee; as a child, her father had called her his ‘princess’, a name that seemed so hollow sounding save for the fact he actually had treated her as royalty. She’d grown up walking with an invisible crown on her
head, a secret knowledge that she was entitled to a life bigger than her peers; she’d become a lady just like her father’s beloved aunt and she’d never be unhappy. Amen.

Georgia Madchen sat across from her, smiling at her pleasantly. Abigail didn’t particularly like Georgia, though she had no real reason for it; maybe it was the weird scaring on her right arm and hand or just the fact that she was so informal to her simply because they were close in age. Abigail tolerated her and didn’t request someone else so as not to offend Mrs Madchen or her secretary Miss Lebeau.

“Miss Lecter, the Vice President sent this over for you,” Georgia said, handing over a manilla envelope from inside her sidebag.

“Thank you, Miss Madchen.”

She opened the envelope and slid a small velvet pouch out. Passing the envelope back to her assistant without acknowledging her as anything more than hands, Abigail opened the pouch and pulled out a small lapel pin which bore the Sidwell Friend’s crest.

“Class of 1983,” she murmured, smiling.

Pinning the lapel to the neckline of her dress, she returned her full focus to the man sitting beside her. Her personal Secret Service agent that went everywhere with her was Agent Barney Matthews, a solid wall of muscle and soft spoken charm. Originally she’d been disappointed to have to give Agent Zeller up for her father’s detail, but her father had assured her that Barney would be a far more valuable asset and faithful companion than Zeller could ever be and while she didn’t know why he was sure of that, she trusted his judgement and had warmed up to him immediately. When her father had been governor, she’d had Maryland state troopers who escorted her to school and she never gave the various men a second thought. Now she had the constant presence of an agent by her side and while it was stifling, Barney respected her and her father deeply, which was all she really cared about. She smiled up at him—he was ridiculously tall!— and he smiled back at her.

“You’re going to great, Abigail,” he assured her and she nodded.

“I think so, too.”

They arrived in front of Sidwell Friends and as they sat and waited for the other agents, she watched Mrs and Miss Madchen stir restlessly in their seats across from her, ready to exit the heavily armed fortress of a car. She fought back the urge to give them a disapproving look; she’d disciplined herself from a young age to sit still so as not to reveal any signs of agitation. Her father had taught her very well and she was stationary and patient.

Finally the door was opened and she took a deep breath as she stepped out, pretending not to notice any of the White House press photographers that had followed them there to cover her trip to her old school, specifically ignoring the one from FOX News, still angry with how they’d referred to her last public speaking engagement ‘frivolous’. Barney carefully cupped a hand against her elbow, prompting her forward. Specific orders had been given to Sidwell Friends not to clear the hallways for her arrival as she wanted to be seen walking amongst the students; Aunt Bee had told her it made for a better photo op to be seen interacting amongst children. They arrived right as classes changed, which meant students in uniform and teachers were milling around. She was certain it was a nightmare for Secret Service to deal with all the distractions, but that was their problem, not hers.

She’d worn scarves here, too; they had amended the school dress code specifically for her as the rules only permitted religious head coverings and she fought the urge to fuss with her silk scarf. She’d gone to school with everyone here and there were plenty of familiar faces, which meant she
shook hands or waved at those she recognised.

“Abbs!”

A hand shot up above the throng of students and see didn’t have to see the girl’s face to know immediately who it was.

“That’s Marissa,” she alerted Barney quickly, not wanting her best friend to be seen as a threat.

Barney nodded and the other agents moved enough so that when her friend reached them, she was able to immediately fall in time with Abigail as they walked down the hallway.

“Just like old times,” Marissa said with a giggle, clutching her binders to her chest as she adjusted the backpack hanging from her left shoulder.

Abigail scolded her friend, but allowed no malice in her voice. “You should be more respectful of me. I’m the First Lady, you know.”

Abigail waved at a few freshman who smiled at her. Marissa offered them a sweet smile as well before she continued. “Yeah, whatever. Hey, there’s a party this weekend. Wanna come?”

Abigail hated the parties Marissa dragged her to; real parties were for getting dressed up and talking about opera and traveling and art, not getting drunk and listening to Top 40s with overdone bass. She was much more interested in adults than the philistine rich kids she had gone to school with.

“Can’t. Training my replacement and then I have to read books to five year olds for the literacy programme,” she said, faking the remorseful tone.

“Lame.” Marissa pulled her in for a one armed hug around the shoulders. “Kay, I have to go to class. See you at the assembly.”

“Bye.” Her heart skipped a beat at the warmth still lingering on her arm and upper back from the other girl’s touch and she tried not to stare as Marissa’s walked away.

The assembly wasn’t for another thirty minutes and she was led into an administrative office that had been cleared and reserved just for her use. The agents accompanying her this morning were anxious about the space and her own instincts agreed with them; while Sidwell Friends was a very safe and secure facility, there were many ways that they could be caught off guard. The feeling nagged at her and after a solid twenty-five minutes of listening to her staff nattering at her, she made the request for privacy and it was quickly honoured. She sighed and paced around the office briefly before standing by the office’s windows; she gazed out onto the side lawn, eyes taking in newly planted flowers, small pathways and finally settled on a small concrete bench beneath one of the poplar trees. It was a memorial to Tom Faraday whom had died from an allergic reaction to a bee sting when she was ten.

"You shouldn’t have made fun of me,” she whispered, her eyes narrowing and lips curling into a vindictive grin.

A knock on the door startled her back into a normal expression and Barney entered. “Abigail?”

"Yes?"

He motioned for her to come to him. “It’s time for your speech.”

***
Will had never been one for gym equipment and sitting in the converted personal gym on the third floor of the Residence, he felt incredibly out of place sitting on a weight lifting bench while he read over the president’s schedule for the week. Lecter had twice offered for Will to join him in the hour of exercise before they broke away for lunch and Will managed to make an awkward self-depreciating joke about how his lack of knowledge when it came to treadmills that had made the president’s lips twist in amusement, admitting he was no fan of machines either.

“You know, Clinton used to jog. I’m sure you’d be able to go around the Ellipses,” Will pointed out.

Lecter kept up a steady pace, barely breaking a sweat even though he’d been running for a solid forty-five minutes. “Unfortunately for me, this is the most efficient way to exercise here in the White House. Outdoor activities are a logistical nightmare for the Secret Service and with aftershocks of the Arab Spring still in progress, straying too far from my security council is not wise.”

Will skimmed through the files he had in his lap, looking at the crop reports and prepared memos from various members of the president’s cabinet. The rhythmic pounding of Lecter’s feet on the treadmill as he ran made Will think of a heart beating under pressure. He wiped at a small rivet of sweat on the back of his neck—this room felt so hot—and he imagined pursuit of something he was hunting, of something Lecter was hunting, his feet striking the forest floor as he ran after a deer, hands clutching at a rifle, skin hot enough to combust in such cold autumn air, motioning with simple hand signals for Abigail to cut the large animal off—

—dressed in clothes not suited for the snow, running through the blizzard in cold Lithuania, escaping soldiers that were shouting and the sound of tanks and the explosions of American military striking the embassy that was supposed to be a refuge, having no where to take cover as shrapnel rained down around him—

—running around the Ellipsis behind the White House, the pack of Secret Service agents running in time with their commander in Chief, the alpha wolf of these mongrels that trailed around him—

“Will?”

Will jerked backwards slightly as his eyes readjusted to the room. Lecter wasn’t facing him, so Will studied the back of his head, hoping for some clue as to what he’d missed.

“Were you talking?” he asked, his voice almost shaking.

“No.”

Lecter turned off the treadmill, hopping off the machine and wiping at the back of his neck with a small towel. At first Will pretended he didn’t notice the feeling of the president’s eyes on him, but the anxiety became too much and finally he glanced up, careful not to make eye contact.

“What were your first impressions of me, Will?”

He opened his mouth to give something canned and expected, but quickly reevaluated that decision. “My honest impression.”

Lecter gave a small nod. “We should have no secrets between us.”

Will worried his lips between his teeth for a moment, wanting to buy himself time as he thought of all the right words to use. He didn’t need to impress or placate the president, but he definitely wanted to make him see. But he was spared saying anything as an usher knocked on the door and entered. He was carrying a large arrangement of flowers.
“President Lecter?”

Lecter nodded his head. “Yes, Mr Lawson?”

“The Italian Ambassador has sent flowers.”

“Thank you, Mr Lawson.” Lecter excused the usher and passed the card over to Will as he studied the flowers. “What does the card say?”

Will opened the crisp envelope and removed a plain linen card that had a gilt border on the outside. “President Lecter, please accept these flowers in honour of Olimpia Lecter’s birthday. As she was a daughter of Italy, we feel her loss deeply.” Will closed the small card. “Signed by the ambassador.”

“We shall send them a thank you note for their sympathy and flowers after lunch.” Will must have made a face and the other man added, “You may speak, Will.”

“I didn’t realise it was your mother’s birthday,” Will admitted, feeling unsure if it was information he was supposed to know as the assistant.

But Lecter nodded, looking unperturbed. “It is often overlooked, but understandably. She died many years ago.”

“This year is the fortieth anniversary,” Will said cautiously.

“Yes.” There was another moment of silence and then the president spoke again. “Will, if you wish to say something, you always have permission to speak freely. You were not hired to simply hold things and read condolence cards to me.”

Will cleared his throat and looked at the white calla lilies in the bouquet. “There are human rights issues you could tie to the anniversary in November if you wanted to create a platform on it.”

“Such as?” Lecter prompted.

“Syria.”

“I had already considered that.”

“I’m not trying to cheapen your family’s death,” Will said quickly, his brow furrowing as he stared at Lecter’s left ear.

But the other man didn’t seem offended. “It is only natural you would see the connexion. And it would be easy to prevent the media from creating their own theme to my loss. Write a plan of action and give it to Jack. Thank you for being honest. Others would have censored themselves or lied.”

“You are a crusader,” he settled on. “You carry a banner that’s soaked in the blood of your family, of tragedies. You show it not for others’ pity, but for them to understand—you fight because you’ve seen first hand what bad governments and bad policies do to people.” His mind dragged up a biblical quote inscribed on the base of a statue called ‘The Crusader’ in Chicago’s Graceland Cemetery. “Above all things truth beareth away victory’, 1 Esdras 3:12.” Before Lecter could reply, Will blurted out, “How do you see me?”

There was a pause and Lecter seemed to accept the words with a bow of his head. “You can return to your office. I’ll be down shortly.”

Will nodded and stood up, leaving the room quickly, his mind too wrapped up in thoughts of knights
After her presentation, Abigail been ceremoniously gifted one of Sidwell’s heirloom desk chairs, the words, ‘First Lady Abigail E. F. Lecter, Graduating Class of 2011’ inscribed beneath the laser etched school logo. The chair had already been passed off to one of the numerous staffers that had accompanied her to Sidwell and would go in her office; her father would be pleased by the gift as he had a love for heirlooms. She had returned to the office the school had provided for her to use and needing moment to herself, sent everyone out so that she could be alone. As she stood by the windows, looking down at the handful of White House reporters that were milling on the side lawn, smoking and joking while they waited for her to exit the building.

The muscles in her neck tightened and she looked around; someone else was close—hunter’s instinct—and her hand dropped into her jacket pocket, grabbing onto the small device that signaled her protective detail. If her father were here with her, he’d be able to suss the intruder out by scent, but she lacked that ability, so all she could do was look around and try to find them before they found her. When she and her father had received their Secret Service detail a year and a half ago, she’d been instructed at great length to never wait to press the panic button she traveled everywhere with. But she was also Abigail Lecter and she wanted to look death in the face as often as possible.

So she held her breath and waited. At the count of seven, the office’s private washroom opened and her heart raced as she anticipated the possible dangers to come, but was incredibly disappointed to see the fiery curls of one Freddie Lounds. Her hand came out of her pocket, abandoning her panic button, and she waited patiently for Lounds to emerge.

Lounds looked a little startled that she’d already been spotted, but smiled as though she’d spotted a long lost friend. “Hello, Abigail.”

Abigail allowed a cool, eerie smile onto her lips, mimicking the one her aunt gave naturally. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Freddie sat down on the lumpy looking couch, giving Abigail a sheepish smile as she smoothed out her skirt. “I know, I know. How are you?”

Abigail turned her attention to her purse, pulling out a compact mirror and the neutral lipstick she’d favoured for that day. “What do you want, Ms Lounds?”

“An exclusive. You’re only the most popular teenager in the world right now.”

Abigail maintained her smile, but the utter loathing she felt for the tabloid writer made her blood roil in her veins. “When my dad was first elected as the Governor of Maryland, you wrote an article insinuating that he adopted me because he was a paedophile.”

Freddie nodded, looking pained. “That was years ago. It was a mistake. I fixed it.”

Abigail still smiled but narrowed her eyes just enough to hopefully look a shade more threatening. “Did you?”

“Yes. I can republish my retraction again, if you’d like.”

“You also wrote that my dad and my Aunt Bedelia were involved in an affair together, which again is incest as they’re cousins, if only by marriage.”

“Another mistake. A misinterpretation of facts.” Freddie waved away the words as though she
accidentally misstated the colour of his eyes. “Is your dad involved with someone at the moment?”

Abigail shut her compact mirror with a crisp snap. “How’s your investigation of Clarice Starling’s death going? Surely my dad’s personal relationships aren’t as big a story of a woman’s death.”

Freddie’s voice took on its patronising tone she habitually used on Abigail. “Clarice’s death is very complicated. I’m sure it’s been hard on him.”

“The nation is mourning her loss, Ms Lounds. The White House is mourning her loss.”

The other woman tried to bait again. “Your father provided the arrangements for her funeral.”

“Naturally. She had no family. You know that.”

“Yes.” Freddie’s eyes looked hopeful. “Do they have any idea who killed her?”

Abigail spared her a withering glance. “I’m seventeen. Why would I know anything about her murder investigation?”

Another condescending smile from Freddie. “Were you two close?”

“You’re the expert on Washington’s inner politics, Ms Lounds. You tell me.”

As Abigail placed her lipstick and mirror back into her small purse, Freddie attempted to change tactics. “You’ve done rather well for yourself. You’re quite an accomplished First Lady.”

“Thank you.”

“How was your speech today?” she asked curiously.

Abigail tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. “How did you get onto the campus and into this office? I thought Sidwell Friends still had a restraining order against you.”

“Can’t let a little piece of paper get in the way of a story, can I?” Freddie couldn’t keep the smug smile off her face. “Abigail, you really are the most popular young woman in the world right now. Everyone wants to know what’s on your mind. The youngest First Lady in the White House, adopted daughter of a very successful doctor and politician. Not to mention you’re gorgeous and you have such a level of mystique to you—“

“You’re alluding to my life before I was adopted.” Abigail fought to keep her composure. “And why do you always refer to me as his ‘adopted daughter’? At what point am I simply his daughter?”

Abigail decided she was tired of the conversation and pressed her panic button. “Ms Lounds, it’s very rude that you’re here uninvited. I’m trying to do my duties as First Lady and I can’t focus because of you.”

The door—unlocked—was kicked open just as Freddie began to insist, “I just want to talk—“

“Federal agents, nobody move! Let me see your hands!”

“It’s just Freddie Lounds,” Abigail says coolly as the Secret Service swarmed around the reporter. “She was hiding in the bathroom—“

A large arm wrapped around her waist and Barney hoisted her up as though she weighed nothing. “This way, Abigail.”

“It’s okay! It’s just Freddie Lounds!” she insisted as she was carried out of the room, the other agents
surrounding her and Barney.

“I know. But we have to follow protocol.”

She tried to brace herself as they bounded down the stairs together, the world shaking and jerking as her head bounced. “Do you really have to carry me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I should have shoved her back in the bathroom. This is so embarrassing!”

Barney chuckled and she felt herself smile despite the situation. As they approached the main entrance of Sidwell Friends, she quickly grasped at Barney’s arm.

“Please, let me walk back to the motorcade. I really don’t want photos of this.”

Zeller would have never considered breaking protocol an option, but Barney understood immediately that her wishes could be respected while still keeping her safe; his voice was stern. “If you can’t keep up with me, I’ll have to carry—“

“Yes, yes, I can keep up!” she promised, wriggling impatiently to be released.

“I’m going to lower you now—“

Her feet dropped to the ground and with Barney’s large arm now wrapped over her shoulder, they continued the run to the car. The backseat’s door was open and as they loped over, she glanced over to the space the White House photographers were still grouped at. They were just noticing the commotion and running over, fumbling with their camera as she ducked into the vehicle, grinning. Barney followed closely behind and the door to the car was slammed shut.

Still holding Barney’s hand, she burst out laughing; she always loved a good challenge and ‘surviving’ a potential threat was one of the better ones. And proving herself to her agent was fulfilling, too—she wasn’t some helpless waif that needed to be rescued. She was a Lecter. As the motorcade peeled out of the front driveway and sped towards the White House, Barney began to laugh too, squeezing her hand tightly.

*****

There was a knock on the door of Will’s office and knowing that is was Lecter, he kept his eyes on his computer screen and offered out a lackluster,

“Come in.”

Instead of the president’s accented voice, the person speaking was decidedly more feminine sounding. “Hey.”

Will scrambled to his feet, adjusting his glasses as he held out his hand to the woman standing in the doorway. “Hello, Ms Bloom.”

“Hi, Will. How are you?” Her hand was warm and soft in his, and she was giving him that gentle smile that made his cheeks feel hot. “I haven’t seen you since the campaign.”

He nodded, looking around at various points in the room to avoid her altogether. “I’m on loan at the moment. Favour for Jack.”

“So this isn’t permanent?” She took a seat in the armchair between the two bookcases.
“No,” he said very firmly, needing at least one person to believe him.

She nodded. “I’m sorry to hear that. Everyone seems to be under the impression you’re staying for the long haul.”

“No.” He studied the way a lock of her hair curled against her throat and he offered a shy smile. “You know, we’ve never been alone together.”

He didn’t have to look at her face to know he was making her uncomfortable. “I know.”

Before the moment could become more painful, a tall figure appeared in the doorway.

“Alana, what a pleasure to see you,” the president greeted.

She stood up from the armchair and held out her hand, warmth in her voice. “Hannibal, how are you?”

Lecter took her hand between both of his. “I am well.”

She gave a lilting laugh that made Will want to fade into the wallpaper. “It’s funny that we work right down the hall from one another and yet we hardly bump into one another.”

“It appears we have been caught in two different orbital paths, only to cross on the rare occasion. Please join us for lunch.”

Alana’s smiled became a grin. “I could never turn down an invitation from you.”

“I hope you don’t mind leftovers, Will.” Lecter nodded his head, the request for him to follow unspoken.

There was a kitchenette across the passageway from his and Will lingered awkwardly against the wall, watching the familiarity that occurred between the two as the president retrieved brown glass bottle from a small bar refrigerator and presented it to her.

“Your private reserve.”

Alana accepted the glass Lecter handed her, popping the seal on the top of the bottle. “You spoil me.”

“You brew beer, too?” Will asked, trying not to let annoyance seep into his voice.

Lecter led them to the dining room. “Only for Ms Bloom, I’m afraid.”

“You can split a glass with me,” Alana said, pouring half the bottle into the beer glass and placing it in his hands before he could decline.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

Alana’s attention stayed on him briefly. “I’m still trying to guess all the ingredients. I’ve already figured out that it was brewed in a cabernet sauvignon wine barrel.”

“I love your palette,” the president complimented. “You have seven more bottles with which to guess.”

“Will you be brewing more for me?”
Lecter stood in a small side pantry with a small stove set up and he turned on a burner to reheat some meat he removed from a narrow refrigerator. “I have been considering a White House brewery.”

Will sat down at the table, not wanting to intrude any further in the conversation.

“Won’t be all mine then, will it?” she asked mournfully.

“I’m afraid not.”

Their friendly, nearly flirtatious banter made him feel restless and his mind whirled out of control, trying to find a way to include himself in the human interaction so that he was not just a stranger in the room.

“You most successful speech was the one you delivered in front of the Maryland State Food Bank,” Will announced abruptly, his voice loud and uneasy.

Alana stared at him, causing his palms to itch and he turned to look out the room’s window, hating himself for his oddities. But without missing a beat, Lecter agreed with him.

“Which had formerly been a brewery.”

Will ducked his head to look at the burgundy carpet; yes, that was probably where the association had come from. The speech—Lecter’s most famous—had been about the obligation the government had to feed the needy; he’d delivered the infamous line, ‘Maryland is my house, and none shall go hungry in my house’ and it had secured the votes he’d needed to become governor of Maryland. Will had told Jack that the quote needed to be recycled and refreshed for the presidential campaign and sure enough on a warm spring evening in Belvedere, Ohio as the sun was setting on a field of corn, Lecter had spoke in that riveting, but calm voice he used at all times and said, ‘America is my house, my home, and none shall go hungry when you sit at my table.’. The delivery had left chills in Will, recognising it as the moment he’d known that Hannibal Lecter was to be the 46th president of the United States.

And now the politician was living up to his promise, actually feeding him as he sat at his table. Will took another small sip of the beer, looking at Lecter out of the side of glasses. How had he been able to see the connexion he’d been trying to make? Anyone else would have been left very confused—evident enough with Alana’s puzzled frown and raised brow.

Belated he nodded and flinched as a plate was slid onto the table before him.

“Roasted beef tenderloin with a pomegranate sauce; white asparagus, yellow and candycane beets, and lotus root salad; and fresh baguette from the kitchens.” Will tilted his head enough to catch Lecter’s smile. “Bon appétit.”

“Thank you,” he murmured, remembering that in this setting, the cloth napkin set under the carefully polished fork, spoon, and knife was to be placed across his lap.

“You’re very welcome, Will.” Lecter turned his attention away and pulled a chair next to the head of the table out. “Alana, if you would like to sit, I shall serve you.”

Alana smiled and took the seat. “Thank you, Hannibal. It looks delicious as always.”

“Alana, did you know that Will—“

Will didn’t have time to panic as the door that led out into the hallway opened and an usher stepped in. “Mr President? The First Lady is here.”
Hannibal nodded. “Please bring her in.”

The usher turned to beckon the young woman in, apparently conscientious that important business might be being held behind the closed doors of the presidential dining room.

Abigail entered the room with a large smile and the door was shut behind her. “Hi, Dad! I made them hurry to bring me home in time for lunch.”

He pulled the chair across from Alana out and kissed his daughter’s temple as she sat down. “And perfect timing. Take my plate.”

“Thank you.” She placed her napkin across her lap as he placed his own plate before her. “Hi Alana. Hey, Will.”

Hannibal returned to the small kitchenette to plate some of the food for himself and Will leaned forward slightly, peering at her without looking at her eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice sounding more strained than he had anticipated.

She nodded. “Oh, yeah.”

Alana looked between the two of them quickly. “Did something happen, Abigail?”

“Freddie Lounds broke into Sidwell Friends to bother me. Nothing new.”

Alana’s face darkened. “We should get that restraining order renewed, Hannibal.”

Will picked at his food, not liking that she’d said, ‘we’, like they meant something together.

“I agree. I shall contact my lawyer after lunch.” Lecter rest a hand on his daughter’s shoulder, leaning in slightly. “Wine, Abigail?”

She turned to look up at him. “A little please.”

Will watched Alana’s lips turn into a disapproving frown; he felt a smile creep onto his lips as he remembered his own father offering him a sip from his can of cheap beer when he was in high school. He’d never actually liked it, but it had been one of the rare moments his father had something to share with him and he wondered if Abigail cherished the offering as much as he always had.

Alana turned her attention to her plate, tearing off a piece of bread to butter. “So what were you going to tell me about Will?”

Will’s smile disappeared and he dragged a portion of beet through the pomegranate sauce, wanting to block everything out, for the White House to suddenly catch fire, for the earth to swallow him whole. But then a miracle happened.

“I seem to have forgotten.” Lecter’s eyes locked with his, glinting red, then looked at the rest of the table’s occupants. “Let’s eat.”
Chapter Four

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

*A Tattle-Politics EXCLUSIVE***!

A new aide to the president has officially been named, replacing the president’s adopted 17 year old daughter, Abigail Lecter, who was acting in the place of Clarice Starling, who was found murdered in January in Folger Park. Just who is this mysterious new man in the President’s life? None other than Will Graham, political savant extraordinaire; Graham was hired on as a consultant to Lecter’s 2012 campaign and is currently a professor of political science at George Washington University, his alma mater, though a quick call to the university confirmed he is currently on a two week leave from teaching. On Wednesday, he joined the President and Abigail for the planting of the White House’s new vegetable garden.

Word on the street says that Graham is a bit of a loose cannon—during the 2012 Lecter campaign he was hospitalised in Alabama for an unspecified illness, and brain scans were taken. His personality leaves a lot to be desired, which I can attest to personally, loyal readers.

Expect more information in the coming days!

***

From the White House rooftop, Abigail wondered what Will would do if he was put in a situation alone with Alana Bloom. The day of his arrival at the White House, Alana had made a nervous sounding mention to her father and Jack that she tried not to be alone with Will—she found her professional curiosity too much and wanted to ‘study him’. Abigail had rolled her eyes behind their backs—it had sounded so desperate and pathetic. Everyone on the campaign bus last year had been talking about how obviously they avoided one another and the longing looks they exchanged when they were forced into the vicinity of one another; she’d overheard Clarice telling Beth LeBeau that they’d both worked in the same election headquarters together during their first year of school and the mutual desire had never faded. It was all so stupid sounding, like the plot of one of those movies Marissa enjoyed.

Abigail exhaled smoke, looking out at the large park behind the White House, and snubbed out the expensive cigarette her father had handed off for her to finish as he accepted a phone call Deputy Chief of Staff Donald Sutcliffe had brought out onto the rooftop. Cigarettes weren’t fun without Dad, wine wasn’t fun without Aunt Bee.

Will had been at the White House for a week now and from everything she’d seen, he was truly the oddity. Curt to most of the staffers and distant with all, she’d learned with some amusement from her own Chief of Staff that most of the White House felt that he disrupted the sociable atmosphere in her father’s administration, that he threw off all the forged friendships that allowed the House to run so smoothly. She’d picked up little details about his inner workings during the breakfasts he shared at their table—he liked to read Clive Cussler paperbacks, had dog hair on his slacks, apparently owned only two nice jackets, would hide his smiles by bringing his cup of coffee to his lips, could make a conversation about anything. What she learned during their lunches together spoke of volumes more,
of his lack of sophistication and trust—he took generic aspirin when he thought no one was paying attention, didn’t understand that the fork on the outside of a place setting was for fish and wasn’t there accidentally, refused to join into any conversation because he didn’t like to talk around Jack or Aunt Bee and Alana. Abigail wasn’t a snob—refinery had to be taught and she was willing to teach him.

But this was all taking so much time. She wasn’t bored, but definitely restless. This as the largest project she and her father had ever worked on and while she understood that this was an exercise in self-discipline and overall patience, it was frustrating that they had to move so slowly. She offered a sheepish smile to one of the Secret Service agents pacing nearby, delicately placing the cigarette butt into the mouth of a small terra cotta frog stationed by the door into the solarium and went back inside.

Alana still flirted with her father in front of her, even though she was obviously trying to be subtle about it. Abigail’s eyes narrowed considerably and her movements became harsher as she thought about Alana; she had no hatred for her aunt’s assistant, but she absolutely despised her arrogance that she might possibly be worthy of Hannibal Lecter. Alana’s presence in her life waxed and waned like the moon, all dependent on Aunt Bee’s schedule in Washington. Private dinner parties just for her, invitations to Abigail’s recitals in school, having her over for Christmas breakfast, and the one time when her father had invited her along to the rare Baltimore Raven’s game that they attended while he was still governor. Alana was certainly pretty, clever, and talented, but she was also a threat and Abigail had absolutely no tolerance for threats in her life or her father’s. Alana was not someone who could ever be a hunting partner.

‘Maybe Will could take her off my hands,’ she thought, her eyebrows lifting as she considered this possibility. ‘She’d leave Dad alone and Will would be happy.’

Alana would start giving coy smiles to him and he’d blush and fuss with his glasses—no. He was their friend now and their friends were not allowed to associate with others in the Lecter cabal. Will didn’t get to be Alana’s friend. Besides, Alana wasn’t making any effort to get him; why should she be allowed to have something she had put no work towards? Abigail smiled to herself as she trotted down to the second floor; she knew it was selfish to want isolate someone who already didn’t have friends and so obviously longed for human interaction, but she didn’t want to share Will if he was truly as great as her father thought he was.

In the Center Hallway stood her father, surrounded by staffers, delicate and insignificant moths gravitating to the Sun. She gave a small wave to her father, who smiled and nodded his head to her before continuing with the phone call. Her eyes raked over the Deputy Chief’s body before she continued downstairs, wanting attention from the people who congregated around the stairs. Soon she was nodding and smiling to the White House staff that greeted her as she walked past; her ego was so delicate sometimes and if she couldn’t have her father’s entire focus, then she’d happily take the next best thing.

While her aunt rarely came to the White House on Sundays, as it was supposed to be a day of rest for Good Catholics, she’d returned with them to work on a bill that concerned marriage equality, politely refusing to join them for lunch. Abigail approached the open door of the Vice President’s office loudly enough that her aunt would invite her in first.

“Hello, Abigail.” Her aunt’s face lit up as though she was happy to be interrupted from her very important work.

“Good afternoon, Aunt Bee. Did you enjoy Mass this morning?” she asked cordially; they always attended dutifully as a trio, much to Abigail’s chagrin.
“Yes, I found it very uplifting.”

They both turned to look at the presidential portrait of John Kennedy hanging on the north wall of the office and they both made the sign of the cross in reverence.

“And you, Abigail?”

“I’m not always fond of Mass,” she admitted solemnly.

“But you suffer with such dignity,” Aunt Bee praised, standing from her desk and walking around the side to her as she unclasped a bracelet she’d been wearing. Slipping it around Abigail’s wrist, she noted, “For your collection.”

“Thank you, Aunt Bee.” Abigail admired the polished silver links now adorning her skin.

“One day you’ll have an entire treasure trove of what Hannibal and I have given you.”

It took Abigail a second to register that her aunt wanted to speak in metaphors and instantly she regretted coming down to the office; she hated these conversations, forced to construct scripts that sounded so pointless while having to search for the true meaning. She wondered if that made her lazy or just longing to be more authentic to what she actually wanted to say. But she was already here and she might as well play along. ‘You suffer with such dignity,’ she thought to herself, resolute.

“I always appreciate everything you and Daddy give me, Aunt Bee. It’s all so priceless,” she said as she clasped her hands before her and sat down on the edge of the desk.

Aunt Bee nodded. “I’m just glad you have use of what I can give you. There are so many out there that wouldn’t be able to comprehend the value of it.”

Abigail paused, wondering if she accidentally stepped into some sort of game between her father and her aunt to see who could lay claim to Abigail the most. “Do you...prefer that I wear what you’ve given me?”

“I enjoy seeing you with what’s mine, of course. You’re not my daughter, but the family thinks of you as belonging to me as well.” Aunt Bee’s expression betrayed nothing of her ulterior motives and Abigail sat still so she didn’t reveal her own discomfort. “And what to you prefer, Abigail? Things your father has given you or things that are all your own?”

“Everything given to me is all my own,” Abigail said very pointedly. Her Aunt Bee smiled, her eyes full of amusement and Abigail cursed herself silently, trying to think of something to make her sound like less of an idiot. “I—I just mean that, um, anything you and Daddy give me becomes mine. Only I can wear it the way I do. Things fit to me differently. They become my own.”

Aunt Bee’s expression changed very subtly into one of approval. Another reward, this time in the form of a small gold ring with red stones slipped off her right hand. “Actually, I’ve been meaning to give you this. It was Mother’s.”

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Abigail crooned, studying the small ring now adorning her.

“Daddy bought it for her before the war.”

“Garnets?”

“Yes.”
Abigail gave a loving smile to her aunt, as though they had anything that could be considered love between them. “Thank you, so much. I’ll take very good care of it, I promise.”

Aunt Bee, whom Abigail sensed had never understood what love was, smiled back in the same way. “I know you will.”

*****

Will stumbled down the stairs of his house, eyes barely open as he listened to the person knocking on the front door for a third time. It was Monday morning and he’d hoped for a little more sleep before getting ready for work. Sure it was just Agent Courtney, he hadn’t bothered to put anything over his ratty undershirt and underwear, and when he opened the front door to see a woman in a jogging outfit, he blinked in shock.

She, however, seemed completely unaffected by what he was wearing. “Hi, are you Will Graham?”

“Yes?” His eyes scanned the yard to see if Agent Courtney had actually allowed her onto the property.

She gave him a toothy smile. “I’m Jessie Pruitt. Are the dogs ready?”

“I’m sorry?”

She raised her eyebrows to emphasis her point. “To be taken on their walk?”

Will frowned and mumbled, “I didn’t call a dog walker.”

“Oh, your office said that you’d be expecting me,” she apologised.

He huffed loudly. “Hold on.”

Shutting the door behind him, he headed back up the stairs to his bedroom, slipping on the pants he’d left on the floor the night before as he dialed Jack’s number on his cellphone.

“Jack, there’s someone here who says she’s supposed to walk my dogs,” he said the moment the other man picked up.

“Yes. Jessie.”

Will glared even though there was no one to see him. “Care to explain?”

“The president wanted to make sure you weren’t worried about the care of your dogs due to your work hours.”

Will didn’t dignify that with a response and hung up, returning downstairs and opening the door to see the woman still standing on the front porch. At the sight of his face her smile slightly faltered.

“I can leave…?”

He shook his head, trying to be grateful for her presence. “Let me get the leashes.”

“Great. Any special treats?”

“Treats?” By now the dogs had found their ways downstairs and were milling around, excited that there was a friendly stranger and that the leashes were out.
“I give the dogs treats during the walk to reinforce good behaviour.”

He reached over to an old coffee tin by the door that he stored milkbones in. “Here.”

He told her their names and briefly offered personality points on each of the strays, all vying for her attention. After he sent them on their way with the request she lock the door behind her when she brought them back, he went to the kitchen; he started his cheap coffeemaker and refilled all the water bowls in the dining area, putting kibble in each food bowl as well, before returning upstairs to shower off the sweat he’d garnered during last night’s unpleasant and disjointed dreams.

Once dressed and checking his email and Blackberry for anything important as he drank his bitter coffee, he waited for the agent switching out with Courtney to arrive. He was planning on riding back to DC with Courtney as he’d forgotten to fuel up the day before and gas was expensive in Wolf Trap.

When they finally made their way to the White House, Courtney made no effort to engage him any conversation beyond, “Nice weather this morning,” and “More traffic than usual, huh?” Will offered “hmm” both times and was left alone after that so he could stare out the window, his mind far away, imagining his favourite fishing spot by his house.

‘Only one more week, then I can leave,’ Will thought to himself as he walked down the Center Hall to the Residence’s kitchen. He’d tell the President this morning—confidently—that he didn’t need a dog walker, that he was perfectly capable of caring for his rescues by himself. But that plan was quickly abandoned when he found Abigail alone in the kitchen; she stood at the counter, leaning over a magazine as she picked at a bowl by her right hand.

“Good morning,” he greeted tentatively; she glanced up at him and smiled.

“Dad’s in the situation room.” She dropped her spoon into the bowl. “I’m just eating muesli, but if you want something, I can cook it for you.”

Will had no idea what muesli was, but he didn’t want to have a production made out of his breakfast; she was expecting an answer and while his first instinct was to lie and say he wasn’t hungry, his stomach growled loudly. “I’ll have some, too.”

He sat down at the counter, watching her retrieving another bowl and scoop something that looked like granola out of a sleek canister that had been left out on the counter. She then retrieved container of milk from the fridge, bringing it over to him.

“Coffee?” she asked, pausing.

He shook his head. “I’m fine.”

As she brought him a spoon, she informed him, “It’s the Cairo riots. They have to decide if they want to keep sending Egypt aid.”

He nodded and looked at the cereal in his bowl, noting chopped apricots and golden raisins as big as his thumb.

“Your dad hired a dog walker for me,” he finally stated as he poured milk over the cereal.

Abigail gave him a content smile as she put the canister back into the cupboard. “Oh, that’s nice of him.”

“I didn’t exactly ask,” he said curtly.
“He just wants to be helpful.” She shrugged and Will felt like a petty idiot. “Your file says you rescue strays?”

“Yeah.” He took a bite of the cereal, which was in fact much better than he’d expected. “When I went on the campaign bus last summer, I had to find homes for all of the rescues, which was good. After I returned to Virginia, I was stuck at home with nothing to do but talk to Jack on the phone, so I started picking up strays again. It’s better than coming home to an empty house.”

She was quiet and he assumed she was mulling over his sad life, so he focused on his breakfast, not daring to look in her direction. He was not expecting her next question.

“Do…you have any pictures? Like on your phone?” She looked embarrassed, “Dad won’t let me get a dog just yet. He says they’re a lot of responsibility and it wouldn’t be fair to get one if neither of us have the time right now to take care of it.”

Will quickly pulled out his phone and sorted through the various functions to find the photos he’d taken of his newest band of rescues in the event one went missing. She came closer and feeling a little excited that this was the first time someone had asked about his dogs (aside from the dog walker this morning), showed her the pictures he’d collected of his small pseudo-family so far.

“This is Winston. He’s the newest. And that’s Maddie and Joh. This is Pepper—she’s really good off a leash. And Troy—he was my first rescue since getting back to Virginia. And lastly, Bismark.”

He felt proud that each dog was worthy of being shown off to the teenager—he’d spent so much time on each of them and they really were good dogs, all by his own hard work and patience with them.

“They’re all so cute,” she sighed and scrolled through the photos, studying them as he esuriently ate the muesli. “Do you get them at shelters?”

“No. I—I mostly find them. Sometimes I get calls from the manager at the grocery store who sees them hanging around out back. I’m usually able to find their owners, but sometimes they just end up staying with me.”

“You rehabilitate them?”

“Yes. They’re all good; they just need someone who will work with them.”

“If you ever wanted to give one of them away, I’d make Dad say yes,” she promised, returning to her own side of the counter.

Will laughed, slipping his phone back in his jacket pocket. “You dad would want something purebred, I’m sure.”

Abigail actually frowned at this. “Dad doesn’t put stock into that kind of thing. Animals or people.”

Abigail’s blue eyes held his mercilessly and Will had the sudden terrifying impression that she was staring directly into his mind. He forced his eyes away to stare at the wire basket of oranges on the counter.

“Well, I don’t really care what he thinks about me,” he informed her peevishly.

“Don’t you?”

“I really don’t.” He split a raisin with the tip of his spoon.
“Why?” She clarified. “He’s the most important person in my life, so I can’t fathom why other people wouldn’t worship him as well.”

“He’s perfect.” The words sounded so petty, but they were the truth.

“You don’t like him because he’s perfect?”

“He’s almost too good to be true, isn’t he?” He pushed the split raisin under the surface of the muesli. “Untouchable.”

“Do you want to see what the world is like through his eyes?”

“It might be too happy for me to handle.” His voice was taking on a bitter tone.

“What about his life is happy?”

Will had no idea why he needed to prove himself to a teenager he hardly knew, but the drive was strong and unburdening himself of his emotions simply required that he was asked.

“Everything, Abigail. He has a family who worships the ground he walks on, he has a job he is extraordinarily good at—which is pretty astounding considering its known as the most difficult job in the world—not to mention he’s a top rated surgeon, so he’s not only a diplomat, but he can actually save lives physically. And he speaks seven languages.”

“No one gives a fuck about seven languages, Will.” She was suddenly aloof and cool, rejecting him, and it stung. “I don’t think you really see my dad at all. Maybe you should look a little harder. If you think all of that means he’s happy, you’re really wrong.”

“Is he unhappy?”

“Oh, he’s happy. It’s just…” She smiled at him as though she wanted him to understand a secret. “You’re looking at the surface of matter. My dad’s not happy because of those things, but in spite of them.” She offered out her hand. “Let me wash your bowl. You can dry.”

He allowed her to take the bowl and followed her to the sink. As hot water ran from the faucet and she wet a dishcloth with it and dish soap, he found himself watching her, ever aware of the instinct to protect.

“Are you happy?”

“What do your special senses tell you?” she teased.

He said nothing until she looked at him. “I don’t want to use my ‘empathy’ on you.”

“Why not?”

“Because it would betray the trust we have between us.”

Her eyes widened slightly, then she returned her attention back to the dishes and she nodded. “I’m very happy. I have my dad and that’s all I want.”

“You don’t want more?” he pried, in spite of himself.

“A dog.” She smiled at him.

Will chuckled, drying the bowl handed to him.
The president still hadn’t returned by the time Will reached his office, so he busied himself with the files left in the inbox on his desk. There seemed to be a constant supply of letters that had to be read and sorted, ones from average people who wanted their voice heard and ones from dignitaries who wanted their voice respected; Will read each one briefly, catching the general feel before determining if it was something he should pass on for Lecter to read or to be filled away with the millions of other letters he received. They’d already been screened once for any form of threats, so he (thankfully) didn’t have to find himself in the mind space of some nut-job who wanted the President dead.

When the President wasn’t in the Oval Office, traffic in the narrow corridor outside his office became nonexistent, so he allowed himself the luxury of leaving the door to his office partially open. Having the amount of privacy he did was very enjoyable and took full advantage of it; he knew that previous aides hadn’t been given the perks he was given and he knew that GWU would be hard pressed to offer him accommodations if he ever tried to use this contract as leverage.

Will’s Blackberry buzzed, startling him out of a letter from a farmer in Montana who wanted to know when the President would be addressing illegal immigration as he had migrant labourers who risked deportation. Picking it off the edge of his desk, he looked at the screen and saw he’d been texted by Abigail.

{Send me a photo of your dogs. This meeting is boring.}

“Is that Abigail?”

Will jerked his head up, blinking in surprise to see Lecter standing in the doorway. “How did you know?”

Lecter glanced at phone, still not stepping inside of the office. “She’s supposed to be in a meeting at the moment and she habitually texts during them.”

“She wants a picture of my dogs,” Will explained.

The corner of Lecter’s mouth twitched with the hint of a smile, that Will joined in with until he remembered that he was actually still annoyed with the president.

“I—I don’t need you hiring dog walkers for me,” he said firmly.

“Ms Pruitt is a professional, Will. She is used by many of Washington’s politicians to care for their dogs.”

Of course she couldn’t just be a dog walker, but some specialty concierge that catered to elite clients.

“I appreciate the gesture, but I’d rather care for my dogs myself,” he told the President.

“As you wish. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Will knew he was being mocked. “I’m not offended.”

“Yes, you are. You think I’ve overstepped my bounds and you are attempting to maintain control over your own life.”

Will’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, ‘attempting’?”

Someone from the direction of the Oval Office called out. “Mr President? Dodge is on the line.”
Lecter bowed his head. “If you will excuse me.”

Will watched the empty doorway and then looked back down at his phone. He spent the next three minutes figuring out how to text a photo of his dogs to Abigail.

*****

The last man who’d occupied the nation’s highest office had been Frederick Chilton; Chilton had been a hideous fluke in the political system and country seemed eager to forget about him. In 2008, the Republican party had picked Senators John McCain of Arizona and Frederick Chilton of Pennsylvania as the presidential and vice presidential nominees respectively, desperate to keep the White House after Bush’s two terms; after a nasty campaign, they’d beaten Senators Barack Obama of Illinois and Joe Biden of Delaware by a narrow margin, securing the Republican hold of the White House for another four years. Then in 2010, President McCain’s cancer had reoccurred for a third time (the first two being in 1993 and 2000) and unlike before, it had spread from his face into the lymph nodes of his thymus and then into his lungs. McCain had quickly turned over the presidency to Vice President Chilton, a move that had horrified nearly everyone who was involved in federal politics; Chilton had never been particularly popular, viewed as both conniving and inept at succeeding in anything that might be of actual importance.

In polls he’d be found less trustworthy than used car salesmen and had been nicknamed ‘The Carney of the Washington Circus’. Will had found that reference incredibly funny, imagining that Chilton was offend he wasn’t even considered the ringmaster of the fiasco. McCain died later that year due to complications from surgery and Chilton had thrown his power around to disastrous results: he’d set back Russian and Chinese relationships with the US after a horribly timed joke at his first White House Correspondent’s Dinner, caused three chiefs of staff to resign after only a few months on the job, refused to resolve two ongoing wars that everyone had grown weary of, and had spent more money than anyone had thought possible, bring the country into an economic crisis.

Chilton hadn’t been entirely bad, though. He’d provided money to every state to have bridges and other critical infrastructure repaired or rebuilt, saving local governments billions of dollars. He’d also upheld Roe vs Wade, much to his fellow Republicans’ chagrin, and had refused to defund Planned Parenthood. But no one had every really paid attention to anything good that he’d done and Will supposed with time the history books would be more sympathetic to him.

It was a surprise however when the Presidential schedule updated with a notification that in July, the President and Chilton would have a formal lunch together. Considering how ugly the debates had gone over last year, it seemed hard to imagine the two men would agree to meet with one another, let alone have to sit down and be civil to one another over food.

“I’d love to be a fly on the wall for that,” Will muttered to himself and tried not to laugh.

*****

Will had stupidly assumed that all his work for the President would be solely in Washington DC and reality caught him off guard when Jack walked into his office with a packet that had been stapled together haphazardly.

“Will, on Saturday the President is expected in London for a meet and greet with the royal family, then he’ll be meeting with the French President on Sunday. We’re leaving Friday morning, and should be back on Sunday night so pack a bag for a two night stay. Here’s a list of what you’ll want to bring and the itinerary for the trip is going to be sent to your Blackberry.”

Which was how on a Friday morning Will found himself flying on Marine One with the Lecters and
Jack to the airstrip that housed the massive SAM 28000 known best as Air Force One. Will had never been on a helicopter before that morning and when it landed on the back lawn of the White House, he tried not to look too apprehensive about climbing aboard with Jack; he swallowed two aspirin and tapped his foot anxiously as they waited for the First Family. Sandwiched between Beverly and Jack, Will put on the headphone communicator handed to him so he could hear what was being said over the sound of the HMX-1’s massive rotor-blades overhead.

Finally Agents Zeller, Price, and Matthews boarded, followed by Abigail and the President. She smiled at him and spoke into her headset.

“Testing, testing. First Lady to Marine One, do you read me?”

Everyone aboard the helicopter quickly responded, all voices enthusiastic. Will’s eyes met the President’s for a moment before he braced himself as the Nighthawk lifted off the ground, taking them over the nation’s capitol. Will held his breath as he caught sight of the two decoy helicopters flying with them, the Washington Monument in the distance. It was incredibly surreal, possibly the moment where it finally hit Will that he was actually working for the President of the United States. ‘What would Dad think about this?’ he thought to himself and even though he was still nervous about being aboard something that was a target for being shot down, he smiled slightly.

Air Force One, at least the aircraft designated with that particular call sign for the day was a massive SAM 28000, built to be a traveling White House. The press cabin was already filled with familiar faces of the White House Press Corp and he pushed past them quickly to avoid questions. Abigail was walking before him, carrying a tote bag Georgia had brought for her, and the President in front, offering gracious nods and polite greetings.

While he wasn’t new to flying, Will had never actually traveled outside of the country and his passport was mostly for the sake of having one, so it was stored neatly in a sandwich bag and tucked into the traveller’s wallet around his neck. Arrangements had been made for his dogs and he had brought along his camera to take pictures, though he doubted he’d be much of a tourist on the trip. His luggage had already been brought aboard the plane and while it was nice to have everything taken care of for him, it was strange.

In the section of seating designated for the ‘fly-alongs’, people who weren’t press, there was a traffic jam of various Secret Service agents trying to separate the President from his entourage and Will felt claustrophobic as he was caught between Abigail and the President’s detail.

Beverly elbowed him in the side, a gesture he assumed of camaraderie. “Welcome to Air Force One, Will.”

Abigail turned back to look at him, her voice lowered. “You get to sit in the back with me and Jack. The office is much nicer than the press cabin or staff lounge.”

“Good to know,” he muttered back.

“Good flier?”

He looked back at Zeller. “What?”

“Are you a good flier? Some people get sick or have anxiety,” Zeller asked.

“I’d guess anxiety with Graham,” Price said as he looked Will over.

Will glanced away. “Neither.”
Beverly motioned for everyone to keep walking. “He swallows his pills dry, boys. I wouldn’t worry about him.” She smirked. “Brian here can’t even take pills without hiding it in food.”

Zeller seemed at a loss of words to defend himself, but managed an annoyed, “Beverly, don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

“Move!” Jack shouted from behind them and Abigail giggled as Will followed her to the office of the President.

Not long after take off, Jack received a phone call that forced everyone out of the office except for himself and the President.

“Want to go listen to music?” Abigail asked as they moved to the secluded seats reserved for Secret Service and high ranked staff.

He found a window seat far from everyone else and she settled across from him.

“I…”

She pulled something made of wires and connectors out of her bag and handed it over to him. “I have headphone splitters. Normally I listen to Dad’s music, but I’d rather see what you have.”

“Okay.” He handed the iPod over to her. “You can pick.”

“What are you listening to?” she asked as she began hooking up the connector and their headphones.

“If there’s anything you don’t like, just change it.” He doubted Creedence Clearwater Revival and Robert Plant were her taste.

“This is fine.”

She held out her bag of trail mix and he shook his head. She turned her attention to the window and he opened up the paperback to the place he’d bookmarked two nights ago, fighting the smile that for a few quiet moments he could pretend he was sitting next to a daughter of his own on a plane trip.

*****

Will returned to America with little rest; he refused to sleep on planes as a general principle and he’d only had a few hours back in Virginia to rest before having to get up for work again. The trip overseas had definitely not been a vacation, being bustled from location to location with Jack hanging over his shoulder as they watched Abigail and the President pose for photos with various people of note. It had been uncomfortable to be part of an entourage and he had flashbacks of last year’s campaign. He had, however, struck up a fairly good relationship with Georgia Madchen, chatting with her during staff breaks about her plans on enrolling in university, so the trip hadn’t be a total loss.

When he arrived at the White House the following morning, tired and eating the last of a breakfast burrito he’d purchased at a gas station he frequented for his meals, he avoided the Residence to go straight to his office where he could sleep at his desk for an hour, Lecter be damned. He’d rather show up late than as groggy he was now. He drifted in and out of wakefulness for a good thirty minutes before someone knocked on his office door.

Georgia leaned her head in and he tried to sit up quickly, brushing his hair out of his face and putting his glasses on properly. She averted her eyes to the windows until he cleared his throat and she
greeted him.

“Morning, Will.”

“Good morning, Georgia.”

She stepped into the office. “I thought you might be up in the Residence. The First Lady was looking for you.”

He fidgeted with his glasses. “Oh?”

“Yeah, she was worried you hadn’t had breakfast.”

“Oh, I already had something before I arrived.”

“Well, I didn’t want you to feel ambushed when—“ She glanced at the door. “When breakfast shows up.”

An usher entered his office as she stood aside, holding a tray of food.

“Good morning, Mr Graham. The President and First Lady wanted to make sure you had breakfast.”

“Oh,” he said as the food was set down on the desk before him.

“Do you need anything else, Mr Graham?” the usher asked.

“No. Thank you.” Will looked down at the food before him and the usher nodded, leaving the office.

“Do you want to sit?” he asked Georgia as he pulled out the cloth napkin from under the utensils, placing it across his lap.

“Thanks.” She sat on the armchair closest to the door, tucking her feet up under her. “You’re still tired?”

“Exhausted.” He looked over the crepes that appeared to have meat wrapped inside them.

“You’ll get used to it. Just drink lots of water during the trip and sleep whenever you can.”

“Doesn’t do me much good now.”

She chuckled. “Guess not. But at least today is just a photography day. They’re not so bad. It feels chaotic, but it’s really organised. The President, the First Lady, and the Vice President will be answering questions for magazines, editorials, and blogs. You’re just going to stand around here with me and Alana while we bring them water or whatever else they might need. You’ll probably want to bring along a couple lint rollers.”

“Sounds simple enough.” He took a bite of the crepes and suspected ham, savouring the taste.

“What do you work on?” She looked curiously at the large stack of papers on his desk. “I only do little things for Abigail. Carry her stuff around. Hold onto her paperwork for her.”

“Uh, the president has me look over things. He still thinks of me as a campaign advisor.”

“Oh, that’s not so bad.” She smiled at him and he offered her one in return. “I might like to try something that challenges me mentally.”
“This is hardly challenging, I’m afraid. It’s just…what Jack is too lazy to do himself.”

“Is working with the President fun? If I wasn’t working for Abbs, I would put in my papers to transfer to his office in a heartbeat. He’s so sweet. And so smart. I bet you two talk about everything.” Her smile was warm and Will felt embarrassed that he only had thoughts of the grudge he held about this whole experience.

“The president and I are in two different offices. I…work on other things when I’m not bringing him something.”

“Oh.” She looked around his office. “We’re all together in the same room over here, so everyone talks with everyone else.”

“It must be nice to work with your mother.” Will hoped that the Madchens were on good terms with one another.

“I love it. She got me the job here. I would have been happy to be one of the tour guides, but she put in a good word for me.” She quickly added. “It wasn’t rigged.”

“No, of course. The White House wants people they know and can trust. You’d be a shoe-in.”

“I heard you were hired to be his friend.”

Will snorted. “I don’t think Hannibal Lecter is very interested in being friends with someone like me.”

Georgia tilted her head. “Everyone else seems to think you two get along well. I thought you did when we were in London.”

“What else are people saying?” Will kept his eyes on the cup of coffee set amongst hibiscus and tiger lilies.

“You know, it’s just something we talk about. He’s not invited anyone over, like guests. Most presidents fill up the White House with their friends and families in the first hundred days. I know he’s busy with all the big laws he’s passing, but…”

“It’s lonely at the top.”

“And he has you.” She looked at the food on the desk and as Will tried to protest, her Blackberry beeped and she looked it over. “I’ve got to go. I’ll see you in the Map Room later, ‘kay?”

*****

Will hated carrying the small satchel of the President’s belongings around, anticipating such matters as new collar stays and whatever music he might want to listen to. It wasn’t difficult or beneath him, it was simply boring; political analysis could become ugly, but at least his mind was distracted. Here in a room of makeup and hair people, personal dressers, photographers and their crews, and annoying journalists, Will felt the irritation of his job even more, rubbing the wrong way. Why did everyone want to talk about such shallow questions—“Are you dating anyone?” “What’s your favourite part about being President?” “Who are you wearing?”—when they could ask something of importance? Or not ask at all, considering they were probably going to return to their computers and write some sort of romanticised ‘Return to Camelot’ piece.

He tried to push away his own instinctual sarcastic replies, instead allowing the President’s calm replies—“No, I am not currently seeing anyone.” “It is a privilege to serve those that are unable to
help themselves.” “This is part of the Tom Ford Spring 2013 collection.”—to become his own mindset, ignoring the urge to lash out at anyone who glanced in his direction.

Abigail sat to the side of the President’s photo shoot, wrapped up in a satin dressing gown to keep her clothes underneath from becoming wrinkled or covered in lint. Lecter was being photographed in the Map Room as he spoke about his mindset, ignoring the urge to lash out at anyone who glanced in his direction.

Will stood with Georgia, listening to her speak quietly “Abigail’s just had her picture taken for the YDA. Isn’t she so pretty? I was an awkward looking teenager. I had headgear and a perm that went bad.”

“She’s certainly her father’s daughter,” Will commented.

Georgia quickly pulled out her phone and brought up a photo she’d taken of the young First Lady earlier in the day. “Vogue has been dying to get her on the front page; this is in the Blue Room.”

Abigail stood beside a table with a towering orchid arrangement; she was in a high necked dress the colour of the purple crocuses in the low flowerbeds outside the Presidential Dining Room—most famous color of the ancient world was Tyrian purple, produced in Phoenicia, fetched its weight in silver at Colophon—and wearing many strands of dusky green pearls that twisted around her neck to cover her scar and draped across her chest—such necklaces can take years to made because of the rarity of the colour—and on her lips was a subtle smile, all shades of Lecter, her blue eyes the focused on the camera before her, not Georgia.

‘All the colours of a peacock,’ Will mused.

“She really looks like a First Lady, doesn’t she?”

As Will nodded, his Blackberry buzzed.

A text arrived from Abigail. {Do you like talking to Georgia?}

Will fumbled with the small keyboard, paranoid that Georgia would realise he was talking about her. He only managed a simple reply. {she is nice}

{Is there anyone acting rude to you? I can get rid of them for you.}

He nearly jumped when Georgia asked him curiously. “Having trouble with the texting?”

“A little. I’m not used to it. Can’t find the punctuations marks…” he murmured as he tried to sort his fingers to hit the keypad properly.

“Yeah, there’s a bit of a learning curve at first. Don’t worry—you’ll get used to it.”

{no i donttalk to an yone else}

He scowled at the broken sentence, but didn’t have much time to dwell on it as the President called out for him.

“Right.” Will stuffed the Blackberry back into his pocket as he hurried over with the lint roller.

Will allowed his mind to fall into a numb auto-pilot mode, overriding every mindset he could possibly slip into with all the people milling around the room; he imagined his dogs running around in the field surrounding his house, playing and barking as he tossed tennis balls. After some time, Abigail materialised in the field, wearing the violet evening gown Vogue had outfitted her in. She
waved at him as she lifted the hem of the dress, picking her way through the milkweed and thistles. His dogs milled around her and he hurried over to help her out of the plants that would probably ruin her dress, because wouldn’t her dad be so upset she’d ruined something so nice—

There was a presence at his elbow different than the people milling around and he pulled himself from his daydream to look at the President. Lecter had very bright eyes and with the flashes of light from the photographers’ cameras, his brown irises seemed to glimmer red.

“Will, we shall be reconvening in my office in ten minutes.”

“Do you need me to come with you?”

The President seemed amused and Will tried not to feel like a dog who wanted to tag along. “I will be fine, thank you.”

Will hid out in his office until the President came back to the West Wing; he was carrying a pressed doctor’s coat on a hanger and a stethoscope.

“Props?” Will asked, confused.

“I haven’t worked professionally as a doctor for over twelve years,” the President commented. “And yet it seems to be a title I can’t escape.”

“You’re still licensed, though,” Will pointed out.

“In case politics doesn’t work out.”

Will choked out a laugh and the President smiled.

One of the President’s office assistants spoke from the entry way of the Oval Office. “Mr President?”

Lecter turned towards him. “Yes, Mr Ascari?”

“Medscape’s photographer is here.”

“Thank you, Ms Combe. I am honoured to be featured on your organisation’s website. Can I offer you coffee? Water?”

She shook her head as she quickly began to adjust the lighting tripods and reflecting shades. “I’m fine, thank you. Uh, I called your office ahead of time to ask if you could possibly have your doctor’s coat and stethoscope for the photo shoot?”

“I did bring them with me. Shall I put them on?”

“If you don’t mind,” she said with a smile as she went to her camera bag and began to set up her own equipment.
Will took his cue to enter the office with the carefully pressed doctor’s coat and the stethoscope tucked neatly in the pocket.

“Ah, Will. This is Ms Jennifer Combe. She is taking my photo for—“


She shook his hand. “Hi.”

“How would you like me, Ms Combe?” Lecter asked once dressed in the coat and the photographer had set up her camera; he wore it well, but it was so campy that Will wanted to roll his eyes.

“Whatever comes natural to you. I thought maybe a few of you standing and maybe a few of you sitting? Then I’ll show you the results.”

With Lecter busy posing for the camera, Will turned his attention back to his Blackberry, studying the keyboard until he figured out the punctuation keys. Deciding to test himself, he texted to Abigail.

{How was Vogue?}

Will immediately regretted trying to talk to the teenager, knowing he’d overstepped his boundaries of familiarity, and his anxiety was expounded as every second passed, but soon enough he received a reply.

{Nicer than I expected. How’s Dad?}

{He’s having his picture taken for Medscape.}

{Is he wearing his coat? Pls don’t let him. It’s cheesy.}

He glanced up to see the President leaning almost casually against his desk. It seemed designed to allow anyone watching that he was relaxed, but Will could tell he was a man who would never relax enough for a camera to catch it. Will wondered if Georgia would sneak photos of the President in his doctor’s coat and smiled just enough that it caught Lecter’s eye.

“Will you include a note that this isn’t how I dress for the job, Ms Combe?” The President said with some humour.

The woman chuckled and nodded. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Will, what do you think?”

Will wasn’t sure if he really needed to maintain the reputation of being difficult to work with, but honesty was the President’s policy, so he spoke.

“Take the doctor’s coat off and drape it over your arm. When you’re wearing it, you look like a doctor getting his photo taken in the Oval Office. It’s…amateur. You need to look like a president who hasn’t forgotten where he came from.”

“Over the arm it is then,” the President agreed and Will brought over the lint roller to pick up any stray threads that had found their way onto his suit.

Lecter leaned back against the desk again, the doctor’s coat draped over his forearm casually.

“Oh yeah, this is good,” Combes expressed. “I like it a lot. What about you, sir?”
She brought the camera over to the President, allowing him to review the small screen on the back.

“It’s just as Will said,” Lecter agreed.

Will looked away, staring at the arrangement of orchids on the table between the couches.

As the photographer began packing up her equipment, she spoke to the President. “Um…my sister is part of Médecins Sans Frontières at the moment. It’s her fourth year with them.”

“How wonderful. Where is she stationed?” he asked.

“Uganda, but she’s at home with my parents until the end of the month to give a speech at the Wisconsin Health Convention. She’s a nurse.”

“You are very fortunate to belong to such a talented family. Before you leave, please give my secretary your sister’s information so I can call her and extend my gratitude for her work overseas.”

She smiled broadly, shaking his hand once more. “I will, Mr President. Thank you.”

“Did you ever get placed in Africa?” Will asked curiously after she left.

Lecter handed his doctor’s coat and stethoscope for Will to take back up to the Residence. “No. I served only in Bosnia.”

“During the Bosnian War.”

Lecter nodded and Will’s lips set a grim line. “I’ll take these upstairs,” he finally said as an excuse to get away.

“You may leave them on the chaise lounge in my bedroom, Will.”

Will nodded and backed out of the Oval Office, allowing the makeup and hair dresser to come in. He lingered as he watched the two women start making impersonal small talk with the President, he thought about what he’d said earlier that morning. ‘It’s lonely at the top’. Someone cleared their throat quietly and Will turned to see Price staring at him. Embarrassed, Will averted his eyes and left.

*****

Will wasn’t exactly eager to attend the group photo that was to be taken in the Cabinet Room that afternoon as it meant he was going to have to face people he had hoped he would never have to face. Will was no coward, but he wasn’t confrontational either.

Already in the room was the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Barack Obama and his personal assistant; Will felt a certain level of guilt that he hadn’t helped in the 2008 Obama campaign. The whole situation had been incredibly messy: after his biggest election success to date had been arrested on felony child abuse charges, Will had quit working as a political advisor, unable to trust his own judgment, and as a result, Obama had lost the presidency to McCain and Chilton, a defeat that had been humiliating for the Democratic party.

“Mr Graham,” Obama said as they shook hands when the President introduced them.

“Mr Secretary,” he said, eyes definitely downcast.

The next people to enter the room were the Secretary of State and her aide, which put Will into an even greater state of anxiety.
“Madam Secretary,” he greeted as he shook her hand.

Secretary Clinton’s smile didn’t reach her eyes and Will didn’t have to guess that she wasn’t happy that he hadn’t helped her in 2008, either. She’d never be able to run for office again (he didn’t actually know what the medical condition was, but it wasn’t something she wanted publicly known and all presidential nominees had to disclose their medical records to the nation) and he essentially had been that dream killer.

Slowly the Cabinet Room filled with people who had grudges against Will, primarily over the abandonment of the Dems and subsequent election of McCain/Chilton. Will shook hands with the recently sworn in secretaries: secretary of transportation, secretary of education, secretary of agriculture, and so on. Lecter introduced each person without flair, cordial as he ever was. Will knew of everyone here and had already met half of them through various channels. Alana was mingling with a few of the aides that had followed along; sometimes Will was so disgusted to see himself the man who trailed behind the President like a dog and he was expected to want to associate others in his position. He found a corner to stand in, staring at the screen of his blackberry as though he hasn’t memorised the day’s schedule. After a while, Alana found her way to his side.

"Good day so far?"

"Not too bad," he lied, dry swallowing the tablets in his hand.

Beverly was staring at him from the opposite side of the room as he turned away, hating the feel of her eyes on him. He could tell she was wondering what he was taking—as if he’d be stupid enough to take drugs in a room crowded with some of the most powerful people in the country. He was certain she knew about the encephalitis, so hopefully she thought he was just taking medication. Most of the time he kept his aspirin loose in his left jacket pocket, not wanting to carry a rattling bottle around with him everywhere and he stifled a cough at the feeling of lint having found its way into his throat. Beverly was still staring and Will knew that it was going to be a long afternoon.

*****

The President had a late night dinner planned with his Cabinet and once the photographers left and the specialty staffers with them, Will returned with him to the Oval Office; his time was relegated to updating the software of the devices the President owned as he commented on the new speech the he was working on. Abigail came to visit them, and they took tea together as she and her father discussed politics, of all things. Will didn’t mind being the awkward third wheel to the party, listening to her give a very convincing argument about her views on the minimum wage raise the administration was planning; he ate two pieces of coffee cake only because she put them on his plate, never once breaking her conversation about letters her office had been receiving.

After Abigail returned to the Residence and an usher took away the tea service, Will began to finalise his work for the day, giving his own personal insights to the various Secretaries when the President asked. It was almost like being back at the university, pointing out the small intricacies of politicians that other people failed to notice. When they finished talking about Secretary Villariagosa, the President asked his primary secretary for the phone number that had been left for him by the photographer earlier. Among Will’s main duties was to answer Lecter’s phone and then pass the call to him if he agreed to accept it. The President had yet to make a phone call of his own in front of Will, but this seemed to be changing as he took the phone off the desk and button for the White House’s operator.

“Good evening, Mrs Loewy. I need dial-out service to the following number.”

The President proceeded to dial the number before him and then remained silent; whomever was on
the receiving end of that door was no doubt getting the prerecorded announcement stating that they needed to stay on the line for an important message from the White House. Will wondered momentarily if he should leave but before he could completely decide, the President began to speak.

“Hello, Ms Combe. This is President Hannibal Lecter. How are you?” The President nodded and his lips curled slightly into a smile as though he was sitting across from her holding the conversation. “I am well, thank you. I met your sister Jennifer this morning and she told me you are working with Médecins Sans Frontières as a nurse.”

Will knew he was staring and that it was rude, but it was fascinating to watch; Lecter asked questions, tilting his head from time to time and gave a soft laugh after a brief pause. Will continued organising the files until the President concluded the call.

“You look a little peaked. Are you feeling all right, Will?” Lecter asked after he set the phone back in its cradle and folded his hands neatly on the desk.

“I just need to take off my jacket,” Will replied quietly as he straightened the files into a fairly structured pile.

Lecter looked as though he wanted to say something else, but he returned his attention to the papers on his desk. Will watched the President intently; perhaps he could get out of this arrangement as his aide by claiming encephalitis-related impairments that would otherwise disqualify him from the job. But then he’d be on the receiving end of pity from Alana and no doubt he’d be subject to many conspiracy theories from Freddie Lounds’ camp, neither prospect sounding particularly attractive.

Of course, there had also been the wane in desire to leave, but he was really trying not to think about that at the moment.

“Will you need anything else, President Lecter?”

“No, Will. Thank you for your assistance today.”

Will had been rehearsing something better than ‘no problem’ and ‘it’s my job’ and carefully forced the words out of his mouth. “You’re welcome.”

Lecter’s eyes flicked up to his and Will shifted his eyes enough so that he was looking at the President’s temple instead. And as Will turned away, he caught the hint of a smile on the other man’s lips.

///***///
(Abigail smoking on the rooftop.)
Chapter End Notes

Art found at: http://ninjaninaiii.tumblr.com/post/78146360220/part-1-2-of-the-illustrations
The full-size Medscape picture has amazing detail! Check it out!
Located beside one another in the West Wing, the Vice President’s office and the Chief of Staff office were two separate supporting pedestals on which the Oval Office sat. Metaphorically, of course; in reality they were just down the hallway from the president’s office. During the odd months between election night and the inauguration, Bedelia and Jack had jointly decided that Hannibal would not preside over trivial issues that would never get discussed in the media. Those matters would be sent to her to make a decision on and give her something to do; she wasn’t going to be one of those Vice Presidents that sat around and did nothing while the Chief of Staff made decisions. The White House was reclaimed family territory now and she’d be damned if she didn’t leave her own deep gouges in the history here.

Bedelia stalked down the hallway her office to Jack’s knowing that he would still be there this late at night, busying himself with world matters that would get set aside for her cousin to deal with in the morning. The cubicles in his outer office were empty and the room was half lit, casting odd shadows leading to the open door of his main office. Sure enough, his head was bent over his desk, a highlighter in one hand as the other flipped through a file with pastel green paper. She rapped her knuckles on the doorframe after putting a smile on her face and his head jerked up.

“Bedelia, how nice to see you. Please come in.”

She sat down at a chair across from his desk, smoothing her skirt. “How is Hannibal?”

He smiled at her, as though he understood that Hannibal’s wellbeing was the only wellbeing in the White House that truly mattered. “Great.”

She nodded once and tilted her head. “And how is his new aide?”

“Will is—“

She cut him off immediately. “Don’t lie to me, Jack. I don’t like liars.”

Jack glared at her and leaned back in his chair, bringing his hands back behind his head. “I don’t know why Hannibal wants him. Will is…he’s brilliant, but he has the personality of leper licking piss off hot gravel. And he’s not making an exception for your cousin. Still rude as fuck.”

Bedelia exhaled, looking around the office and easing in the chair slightly so that Jack didn’t feel so cornered. “So, it’s a mystery, then. Alana informed me that Will Graham has no intentions of staying beyond the end of the week. Is there someone else you have available to take his place?”

“A whole village of them, but Hannibal isn’t interested.”

“Make him interested,” she ordered.

He shrugged his shoulders. “He’s interested in Will.”

Bedelia tapped her fingers against her knee. “Then we must make Mr Graham interested in my cousin.”

Jack didn’t look comfortable with this suggestion. “Do we want someone like that around Hannibal? Someone who doesn’t want to be there?”

“Hannibal wants him for a reason.”
Jack smirked. “He wants someone as smart as us.”

Bedelia’s smile deepened. What on earth made Jack think he was as smart as she or Hannibal? He was a very clever man, certainly, but he was so brash and ruled by his emotions—he could never run on the same level as she and her cousin did.

“Did he mention anything about him before last week?” Jack raised an eyebrow.

“No. It was a surprise to me as it was to you.” She hated when Hannibal felt it necessary to play by his own rules. “You said he’s rude to Hannibal?”

“Don’t worry, Bedelia. I won’t let Hannibal chew him up and spit him out.”

“I should hope not. We don’t need a reputation of going through our employees faster than accustomed to. And it would get tiresome rehiring.” She smoothed the thin tweed of her skirt. “Would he want money?”

Jack rolled his eyes, but she knew it was for annoyance at Graham and not her. “No.”

“Could we convince his university that it would be in their best interest to find a permanent replacement for his classes?”

“I don’t know, they really like him. He’s a hot ticket item. One hundred percent success rating for getting a candidate elected? Every school wants him.”

“Everyone wants a lucky charm to wear on their arm.” Her hand unconsciously drifted to the rosary hidden beneath her sweater.

“You think that’s why Hannibal wants him? Good luck? Strategy?”

Bedelia was careful how she replied. “What Hannibal wants has always been different from what I want, though both of us seem to crave the same end results.”

“So what end to you see with Will?” he asked.

“Now Jack, I’m not able to see into the future.” Her teasing smile slid from her lips. “I was so fond of Clarice. She fit in so well here.” Jack’s face darkened and she saw it as an opening for her to get through, torturing the soft vulnerability with sharp ends and fire. Bedelia tilted her head, imagining it looked sympathetic. “And Miriam. She’s your goddaughter, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. Is there anything the White House can do for her family? I saw that next weekend her family is hosting a massive grid search for her or anything that might be a clue in her disappearance. My staffers will be helping, of course.” Bedelia’s voice was syrup thick with her pity.

“I’ll…I’ll contact them to find out.” The pain in his eyes was the most sating thing she’d seen all day.

“I’m sure she’ll be found, Jack.” Done with needling him, she turned the conversation back to what the larger problem was. “You brought Mr Graham into the campaign. Would you consider him a friend?”

“I have his interests at heart,” the Chief of Staff replied, only a hint inauspicious.

Her lips curled upwards. “Do you?”
“Bedelia.” He smiled at her, his tone only slightly scolding.

She smiled even brighter, shifting in the chair and tilting her head. “Find me Mr Graham’s weakness and I’ll make sure he wants to stay. It’s in his best interest.”

Jack chuckled and looked back down at the files. “Oh, I already know what his weakness is.”

Bedelia barely kept her enthusiasm from overwhelming her voice. “And?”

“He’s scared.”

Bedelia considered this, processing Jack’s amusement and the broad generalisation of the statement, then stood from the chair. “I must be on my way. I’m expected to attend dinner tonight.”

He sat forward, looking over the files that were spread out on his desk. “I should be going, too. Bella’s not happy with my work schedule.”

“Tell her I said hello,” she said as though she actually cared.

“I will.”

“Good evening, Jack.”

Leaving the office, Bedelia made her way to the Residence, taking the private elevator up to the second floor. She checking herself in the mirror on the lift’s wall and ignored the usher who was still smiling at her. Satisfied with her appearance, she exited; Hannibal had done an excellent job with the redecoration of the upper floors, including the positioning of the Secret Service that lingered here and there, anticipating all acts of terrorism and disaster. Bedelia ignored the agent acknowledging her and stalked towards the kitchen, huffing in distress before entering the theatre in which her cousin performed. She really hated these engagements and her only small comfort tonight was that Abigail would be there. Dining alone with Hannibal was hideously uncomfortable anymore; he’d spend his time leering at the meat and she’d try to down an acceptable amount of wine before braving what was on her plate.

Hannibal’s human veil was elegant and immaculate, modeled into a masculine version of her own carefully sculpted form. Handsome and articulate, sophisticated and just enough arrogance to think he was getting away with murder. Abigail was no different. A small, refined monster that she could dress up in her own image and teach tricks to for her own amusement and often Hannibal’s discomfort. She looked nothing like a Kennedy, but she wasn’t plain; there was something distinct enough that when she walked beside the man she called her father, anyone could tell they were related. Perhaps they were the same type of creature and the skins they wore couldn’t hide that. Two little cannibals clinging to one another. Bedelia had no idea what appealed to them about eating people; humans were disgusting, small minded, and sniveling. Stepping on them was one thing, but they were better suited for the pavement than her stomach.

Bedelia refused to consider herself one—only those who knowingly ate flesh counted as such. And Hannibal’s only admissions to his pastime were in the form of ridiculous puns so thinly masked, it was truly a marvel that none of his dinner guests had figured him out yet.

Bedelia was grateful that her niece was considerate enough to always remind her cousin that, ‘Aunt Bee doesn’t eat that much meat’, because Hannibal would always serve her an average sized portion and that was too much for her stomach. Not that it really made a difference. When she got home she’d be throwing it up anyway; she suspected Hannibal was aware that his food rarely digested in her stomach anymore, but it had been harder to keep down as the years went by and his cooking
became more and more extravagant. She thought of the days of their youth when she’d give up any engagement just to eat with him—it had been human then, too.

Tonight’s wine was one of Hannibal’s best and she gratefully accepted the glass he handed her, sipping as he poured a glass for Abigail as well. Abigail didn’t touch it as she was focused on the pastry dough for the night’s dessert, which meant Bedelia was going to have to bide her time until she could speak to Hannibal alone; interrupting any of the proceedings in the kitchen just angered her cousin and she couldn’t afford to have him in a disagreeable mood. So the three were left to make small talk, a painful process as none of them actually liked it; Bedelia made vaguely condescending remarks about the New Jersey governor, Hannibal discussed a new stag sculpture in his office, and Abigail said a few words about a New York Times article regarding the homecoming of troops from Iraq. Finally Abigail finished with the dough and Bedelia was able to make her move.

“Abigail, I need to speak to your father.”

Abigail glanced over to Hannibal then said carefully, “I’ll set the table.”

Upon her niece leaving the room, Bedelia spoke. “Dearest cousin, whatever you are doing with Will Graham, stop.”

“I am doing noth—“

“Don’t lie to me, Hannibal.” She was careful to keep her tone gentle, respectful.

Fully aware at his hatred for rudeness, now was not the time or place to play by his rules. This was her White House and she was not going to let him drag anything in that might become a liability. His eyes left hers and he continued chopping the herbs that would garnish the night’s dish.

“I am exploring the possibility of a friendship,” he said casually as though this was nothing.

Ah. So he was planning to play with this young man.

“You are exploring a hostage situation.” Very rarely did she speak so bluntly with him, but she had worked so hard to get them here, to bring forth a Camelot of their own and she couldn’t allow for his blatant disregard to the sacrifices that had bought them the privilege of finally sitting on a throne simply because he wanted to watch someone drown. “I worry what might happen if anyone tries to negotiate his release.”

Now he looked entertained. “Friends and hostages are not the same thing, Bedelia.”

Bedelia openly frowned at this; the word ‘friend’ was not natural to him and most certainly did share a definition with ‘hostage’.

“Perhaps you should consider a garden, instead. To watch flowers grow,” she offered, hoping he’d see how that the people around him should be used as the pawns they were.

“We are already have a garden. To eat from.” He turned his attention towards the direction of the dining room. “Abigail, would you mind assisting me with this reduction?”

Abigail returned to the kitchen, her eyes not meeting hers which meant she’d definitely been trying to eavesdrop. Bedelia hoped that was from her own influence; she could really teach the girl a thing or two about proper eavesdropping if she wanted. But tonight’s focus was about what Hannibal was up to.

She tried again. “Hannibal, do you ever think of Aunt Missy’s gardens?”
Hannibal smiled as he added a dash more wine to the reduction Abigail was tending. “They were quite beautiful. Lady Murasaki was exceptionally gifted in horticulture.”

Bedelia glanced at a potted orchid on the counter by the fruit bowl. “It is a pity you were more focused on learning the art of flower arrangement than on the beauty of the flower’s natural growth within the garden itself.”

“I can see the beauty of a flower in its own environment, but also enjoy greatly the opportunity for my own involvement in its presentation.”

Bedelia avoided making eye contact with the meat in the pan. “A plucked flower dies. Perhaps bonsai would have been more appropriate for your tastes.”

“A bonsai tree is no more permanent than a plucked flower.”

“But the tree lives for many years to come.”

Hannibal looked unimpressed. “All to expense of the owner’s time. Arrangements mean a flower is touched, corrected, and then allowed to stand on its own, wilting slowly.”

“Or quickly, if it is a delicate flower,” she warned.

Hannibal’s eyes were now filled with mirth. “I never picked anything delicate when I wandered through the garden.”

“And now you have a new garden to pick from,” she said, thinking of the White House.

“I still seek nothing delicate. Abigail, would you please set out the white wine glasses and the water?”

The young woman did as she was told; alone once more, Bedelia’s eyes sharpened their gaze on her cousin’s face. “Why would you want a friend? If you need to talk, you can always invite me over for dinner.”

“Are we friends, Bedelia?” he asked, his voice oddly innocent of humour.

She considered this. “No. We’re colleagues. We’re cousins.”

He nodded once and returned his attention to the plates. “I want to explore the possibility of friendship.”

Her brow furrowed slightly. “And if it doesn’t work out?”

“Then it does not work out.”

Her smile left altogether and she drew herself up taller. “You need to be more careful, Hannibal. They say bad things happen in threes, which leaves plenty of room for the troubled Will Graham to have misfortune befall him.”

A small smirk crossed his lips. “Dearest cousin, you know I’m not superstitious.”

She finished what was left of her wine, knowing that she could only hope that he’d listened to her, that she’d managed to reach whatever resided behind his human veil. Exhaling softly through her nose, she cultivated her smile and loveliest face again for his sake.

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to say for dessert tonight. I have company waiting for me at home,” she
said slyly, setting her glass down on the counter.

The smallest smirk crossed his lips. “The young man from Senator Reid’s office?”

“No, the one from Boehner’s. I think I could get the debt ceiling legislation signed by the end of June.”

He glanced up at her, looking genuinely pleased. “It would make for a welcome announcement on July 4th.”

Pleased to have their relationship in balance once again, she gave him a look that mimicked fondness. “Then I shall have it signed by then.”

Carefully lifting the three plates that made up their main course, Hannibal nodded his head towards the dining room where Abigail waited. “Shall we?”

*****

“Abigail.”

She can hear him calling her and she looks up into the dark sky above her, at the blinking cold stars. She shifts her hand and eases her finger off the trigger, still maintaining her crouching position over the body beneath her.

“Dad.” She calls his name out only once, needing to ground herself and confirm that she is in fact dreaming and he is waiting for her in the world outside of this massive forest that indeed seems too surreal to actually exist, now that her brain begins to focus on the details.

“Abigail.”

She blinked a few times and sure enough the forest disappeared to be replaced by the Presidential bedroom, her eyes staring at an elegant dresser across from her father’s bed; she had been sleeping on the chaise lounge at the foot of her father’s bed, covered in her down comforter from home. She muttered out a few sleep slurred greetings and she sat up, twisting around to look at her father sitting on the bed. A clock on his nightstand told her it was just past midnight and he had a single lamp lit so that he could read the files he’d brought up with him.

He smiled at her and she smiled back, still incredibly drowsy.

“I apologise, but I need to work through my plans for the crisis in Egypt out loud; everything becomes clearer when I verbalise my thoughts.”

He was lying of course, but it was harmless; he didn’t need to mentally work through anything—he just wanted an audience for his brilliance. It was the reason he’d invited her to sleep in his room tonight, as that was an indulgence she almost always had to ask for. She nodded and sat up, turning around as he motioned her to and she heard him move across the bed to sit close behind her.

She was aware that this was supremely arrogant behaviour for her father, but it was so much fun to indulge him, seeing him so desperate for attention that he couldn’t even let her sleep. It was a privilege to see him in such a state and she treasured it. His hands found her hair and as he spoke, he began to part it, long fingers sectioning off the roots at the top of her scalp; she smiled and nodded in all the right parts of his discussion, basking in the feeling of him plaiting her hair. She was careful not to become too distracted as there was a likely chance he might tug at the tender roots to get her attention focused on him and she made sure she interrupted him a few times to request an explanation for his decisions just to assure him that she is actually listening to what he was saying.
She hated having her hair in braids as it always left her hair wavy and meant she’d have to straighten it later, but wasn’t the exact reason he was doing it? She’d be forced to spend the extra time in the morning to get it straight again, the way he’d conditioned her to prefer it; this made her smile because it was just another attention to detail he had found to add to her life, to remind her that she belonged to him and he to her.

“Thank you for your attention, Abigail,” he said after some time.

She touched his hand and was earnest in her love. “Anything for you.”

“I love you, Abigail.” He guided her to lie back down on the chaise lounge.

“I love you, too.”

He leaned over her, pulling her comforter over her once more. “Sleep well.”

“You, too.”

“G’night, Dad,” she murmured as he continued stroking her head as she started to fall asleep once more.

*****

Bedelia was waiting in the Republican’s office when he entered on a very sunny and cheerful Wednesday morning. “Good morning, Senator.”

He hesitated before shutting the door, his body language screaming of his discomfort at her presence. “Madam Vice President. How nice to see you.”

“Nicer once I leave, I’m sure,” she commented as he sat down behind his desk. “I’ve heard that you’re not planning on voting for my cousin’s job bill.”

He flinched. “Oh, you see—“

“No, I don’t.” She kept smiling at him, but she knew he was well aware she wasn’t happy with him in the slightest.

“Bedelia, I’ve been—“

“I don’t really care how much money you’ve received from your constituents. Hannibal wants this law implemented as soon as possible and your vote counts.” Her hands slipped over his, holding them to the desk in a gesture that to an outsider would look friendly. “You can convince your Representative friends to follow your lead. So it’s almost like your vote was worth more than one.”

He looked desperate for her to understand that he didn’t want to comply. “Bedelia, please,”

“I really need this.” Her middle finger rubbed a small circle on the back of his hand. “How’s your brother?”

The Senator’s face went ashen white. She knew she didn’t have to say anything more and that his vote was sealed in her favour.

“So, do I have your vote?” she asked coyly.

His voice was tight. “Yes. Yes, I’ll be voting for the job bill. You have my vote.”
She released his hands and he drew them back into his lap, his eyes staring at ashamedly at his telephone.

“I’m glad to hear that.” She leaned back in her chair and smiled a little broader, making it clear that she was the victor. “Well, I must be going. It was nice to see you again.”

She didn’t wait to hear his reply.

*****

Will was in the Oval Office with the President, quietly attending to papers Lecter needed while the other man spoke with Jack and the Secretary of Labour Villaraigosa, the former mayor of Los Angeles. Will’s chair was beside the President’s, though Lecter was standing, most likely stretching his legs.

Donald Sutcliffe came into the office, a large smile on his face. “Hannibal, the Job Bill passed unanimously.”

The President set down the file in his hand. “I believe this would call for a celebration. I shall call the kitchens for champagne and something sweet.”

“Unanimously?” Will said aloud with a frown as the President made a call down to the kitchen and was being congratulated by the other men in the room.

Sutcliffe frowned at him in response and Will ducked his head, pretending to be very interested in the thin laces of Lecter’s polished leather shoes. His mind thought of a thousand different things, starting with the name of the leather polish in the bag he carried around for the President in the event his shoe became scuffed, to the waterproofing oil he used to work into his dad’s work boots when they’d lived around the Great Lakes, to the log floats through the water, to the logging mills and that the powdery pulp left over from the mills was transformed into paper and the President’s uncle had owned a successful evening post newspaper in New York and as a result, he’d grown up only hours away from locations that Will and his dad had later laboured in, two very different worlds apart.

He wasn’t wanted here. He was still the outsider. Will wanted to ask why Congress had once again unanimously pushed another one of Lecter’s bills though, because since when had anyone agreed entirely with any President? He felt anxious because it seemed so off but as he opened his mouth to question it, the main door into the office opened and the Vice President entered with her entourage of staffers.

“Hannibal, I’m sure you’ve heard the good news,” she said, her hands clasped before her.

The President left his spot beside Will to take her by the hand and lead her to one of the ivory couches. “I have. The kitchens are bringing up champagne and pastry.”

“It would seem I’ve arrived just in time.” She glanced at Will. “Alana should be here momentarily, Mr Graham.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but she turned away from him, ignoring. Not knowing what exactly she meant by the information, he stood quietly and awkwardly sorted all the files that now lie abandoned on the desk as everyone milled around the two cousins to praise them for their success. The Vice President seemed to have some level of distain for Will and while he wasn’t offended, it was still annoying to be treated so rudely when the President went out of his way to be polite to everyone, including Will.

Alana did arrive and while Will really didn’t know if he wanted to talk to her, he never truly got the
chance as Lecter immediately engaged her in conversation. He sat quietly back behind the desk, ignoring the champagne and nibbling on the bear claw he’d selected from the decadent tray of desserts an usher had brought up for everyone to partake in. The room was quickly filled with high level staffers from various parts of the White House, Alana laughing at a something Secretary Villaraigosa said and others chatting happily amongst themselves, waiting for a television to be dragged in for them to watch the announcement of their administration’s success break live on the news.

As he attempted to sneak out of the office and return to his, Lecter intercepted him and pressed a second pastry wrapped in a napkin into his palm with a smile before allowing him to leave. Will wondered if it was an apology for how he had been so easily disregarded by everyone in the room or if he was just worried Will wasn’t eating enough or even just consideration that he was leaving the pseudo-celebration early and didn’t want him to leave empty-handed. The pastry was filled with sticky almond paste and he licked at his fingers as he ate it and typed at his computer; he was left alone for the rest of the afternoon, and in the evening before Will was ready to go home, the President stopped by his office.

“Will, Abigail and I would like for you to stay for dinner.”

“I can’t tonight. I have to…go grocery shopping.” It was his standby excuse for not socialising with people after work; it took a few times, but people eventually stopped asking.

The President nodded once. “I see. Perhaps another night, then.”

Will made a noncommittal noise, keeping his eyes on his computer screen.

“I shall see you tomorrow then, Will.”

“I’ll see you then,” he mumbled, clicking with his mouse as though he was now in the middle of an important scheduling calendar.

The President left, shutting the door behind him and Will exhaled in relief, though his stomach growled in protest.

“Shut up,” he muttered to himself, trying to feel excited for the freezer filled with tv dinners that waited at home.

*****

It was the first morning that Will had been recruited to assist with breakfast and while it was incredibly intimidating to contribute, he still felt the smallest twinges of honour to be included. Abigail sat at the counter, giggling as she tried to tell them a joke, but couldn’t get through it because she found it so funny, leaving Will chuckling softly and Lecter trying to fill in the joke with his own words which just made her laugh harder. Will had never had this kind of rapport with his own dad and it was blissful to drift in the comfortable structure they provided in the kitchen. Eventually Abigail gave up trying to tell the joke, an embarrassed grin on her face as she drummed her fingers on the countertop. Lecter was smiling broadly, more at ease than Will had ever seen him, and began to toss the red potatoes he’d peeling into the air and catching them on the end of his knife blade; Will was smart enough not to compete and simply smiled as he faithfully finished cutting the scallions that were added to a pan of chopped pork sautéing in butter.

“Will, what are you doing for Easter?” Abigail asked, sunny smile still on her face as she turned her attention from her father to him.
The relaxed mood Will had been in disappeared abruptly and he ducked his head.

“If nothing. Probably take down all the storm windows. I’m not…I don’t celebrate,” he finished lamely, picking the tip of the knife on the potato the president had handed over to him.

She clasped her hands on the counter before her and her voice kept the excited edge it had possessed when she was trying to tell her joke. “Come to Mass with us. We can have an early breakfast—“

He quickly cut her off. “Oh, no…you wouldn’t want me—“

She wasn’t finished and interrupted him in turn. “And when it’s over, you can hang out in the solarium or go back to your house and then you can have dinner with us.”

“I…” His forehead felt hot, the start of a fever. “I don’t make very good company.”

“I disagree,” Lecter said thoughtfully as he spiced the scallions in the pan.

Will shook his head, insisting that there was a mistake being made. “It’s very thoughtful of you…”

“Please?” Abigail voice was starting to take on a tone of desperation. “It’s just that you said you’d be leaving on Saturday and…”

His shoulders rolled inward slightly and he started to feel claustrophobic. “I’d, I’d just be in the way.”

Lecter very graciously came to his rescue and gently, lovingly, brought her push to a halt. “Abigail.”

The young First Lady looked disappointed, but offered him a polite smile. “Well, the offer still stands, if you want to join us.”

The conversation between the three of them came to an end and Will spent the rest of the day feeling uncomfortable and avoiding excessive contact with the Lecters, even going so far as to hide out in his office during lunch time and eating a stash of crackers he’d put away in his desk. It was better this way, it was less disappointing this way. Hiding from his fears was something of a specialty and to see their faces after they had spent a day with him under a social context…he couldn’t bear the thought.

*****

On Sunday morning, Will woke early and dressed in his favourite and reliable fishing clothes, as the Lecters dressed in their finest: polished shoes and precise creases. Will stomached some poorly scrambled eggs and the previous morning’s coffee; Hannibal and Abigail treated themselves to the traditional danishes they enjoyed, this time cooked by the White House pastry chef. Will collected his fishing rods and newest flies, gathering up the dogs, and the First Family was escorted by their elaborate motorcade to the Holy Trinity Catholic Church.

Will spent Easter Sunday dinner alone.
Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was Monday and raining, everything a calm grey and the newest growth of spring an intense green; it was also the first day of April, which meant Will had barricaded himself in his office to avoid any pranks or jokes he might be subject to. He hadn’t even joined the president or Abigail for lunch, sitting instead at his desk, eating a bologna and cheese sandwich from home as he pretended he wasn’t listening to the sound of their voices, muffled from the distance between them. The White House had scheduled their traditional Easter Egg Roll on the front lawn, but the weather had cancelled all the activities for the day. Will wasn’t even supposed to be here today as his last day had been on Saturday, but the drive to stay in this high functioning society was unbearably strong.

If Lecter wanted him gone, then he would definitely leave, but he’d not received any sign that that was the president’s intentions. In fact, it was slightly odd to Will that no one had actually spoken to him today to ask if he was staying or not—the Secret Service hadn’t revoked his badge and his nameplate was still on the door of the president’s study—and not even Lecter himself had said a word on the matter when Will had intentionally showed up after breakfast to be briefed on the day’s schedule. Will wondered if he’d really insulted the president by not attending Mass and Easter dinner with him and Abigail the day before, but Lecter was so neutral in displaying his emotion that Will had practically nothing to go off of. And Lecter wasn’t rude enough to ask something like that outright; Will knew that his decision to stay or not was entirely his responsibility, which he took as a good sign that the president might still want him to stay.

Jack was testifying before Congress on the new healthcare plan that was going to be implemented—the gauchely nicknamed ‘Lectercare’—which meant he wouldn’t have to deal with the man in the flesh while he found the strength to tell the president that he was going to stay. And Will simply stayed in the office, frantically highlighting and annotating various Bible passages he’d printed out for Lecter to use on Wednesday’s Easter prayer breakfast that the White House would be hosting.

GWU had called five times and left messages that were becoming increasingly frantic at the thought they were losing him—which they were—and he’d been offered official tenure and a bigger office, neither of which he really could palate at the moment. Finally lured out of his office by a text from the President requesting a copy of Nigel Spivey’s ‘Enduring Creation’, which had found its way into Will’s office, residing on a shelf between a book on renaissance architecture and ‘The New Encyclopaedia of the Opera’.

The Oval Office was mercifully empty and Lecter explained he had requested absolutely silence from his staff as he focused on the piece of legislation the Vice President had sent over him to review. Lecter vacated his desk, studying something the book Will had brought and Will took the opportunity to look at the photos that were carefully organised on the table behind the President’s desk: a very stately photo of Vice President Du Maurier at a much younger age standing with Senator Ted Kennedy as she was being sworn in; a photo of Abigail in her graduation gown, positively glowing as she held up her ceremonial diploma proudly; a photo of a younger Lecter wearing his doctor’s coat and standing in front of the entrance to the Kathleen Kennedy Memorial Clinic; a photo of Abigail and the President in their hunting camouflage, his arm over her shoulder and her arm around his waist, rifle over his shoulder.

The last photo managed to catch Will off guard; there was a very well dressed woman sporting a very New England Prep look standing beside a man with a very familiar face. Will blinked a few
times then picked up the picture frame to get a closer look.

“Is…is that David Bowie?”

The President glanced up from his book. “That is my Uncle Robertas and his wife, Lady Murasaki. Though the comparison between my uncle and Mr Bowie has been pointed out to me numerous times.”

Will could see out of the corner of his eye that Lecter had found his observation funny and smiled himself. “They look like they were separated at birth.” He set the photo frame back down and as he walked out from behind the desk, the president carefully repositioned the silver back into a straight arrangement with the other photo frames. “I…I would like to stay, if you don’t have another replacement to take my place,” Will announced, distracting himself with a large statuette of a bugling elk on a side table by the doorway that lead to his office and the dining room.

“There is no replacement, Will.”

Will’s fingers itched to feel the texture of the bronze antlers, but restrained himself. “I haven’t told Jack.”

Lecter put a voice to what Will was leaving unsaid. “He will view it as a personal victory instead of a choice you have made.”

“Yeah. I don’t really want to give him the satisfaction.” Will turned back to face Lecter, though he still didn’t look at him. “I’m not staying because of anything he’s said.”

“What will you tell him to take his victory from him?”

“I’ll think of something,” Will said, looking over the president’s shoulder at the pattern of the wallpaper “Maybe I’ll tell him you want me to stay.”

“Are you planning on making me a coconspirator?”

“I was just joking,” Will quickly assured, feeling guilty for trying to be funny.

But Lecter’s voice was kind without being patronising. “I do want you to stay, Will.”

“Because I’m helpful?” Will asked, an odd ache of hope for more.

“Your many uses are beneficial to me, yes. But I enjoy your company as well.”

There was silence between them once more, but this time it was free of the tension that had blanketed them both. Will wondered if Lecter found it lonely at the top of all the success he’d achieved; there had never been any indication that he had socialisation in his private life and Will had a hard time believing it was simply kept secret. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to have a camaraderie that only lasted from 9-5, metaphorically speaking.

Will cleared his throat and tried again for humour. “I’ll tell him that I have better health coverage here than I do at GWU. After all, no one there can tell I’m sick just by smelling the air.”

Lecter gave him a grin. “So I am a coconspirator now.”

“Partners in crime,” Will agreed, feeling a smile of his own tugging at his lips.

“I believe this calls for a celebration.” Lecter began to walk to the kitchenette where the wine was stored.
“It’s only ten thirty,” Will called after him, but the president returned with two elegant glasses and a bottle of white wine.

Lecter seemed unfazed. “Then I shall celebrate.”

Will couldn’t help but chuckle. Now that the weight of his decision had been lifted off his shoulders, he couldn’t help but relax. Lecter sat down on one of the blue striped chairs backed against the empty fire place and gestured that Will sit beside him on the other chair.

Will took the seat and pulled out his phone. “I’ll call him now and give him the good news.”

The president sipped his wine and gave an approving nod. Will quickly dialed the phone number and extension that went directly to Jack’s voicemail. “Jack, I’m accepting the extension of my contract here. With my…condition, it’s best that I stay where I get the best health insurance.” His eyes flickered to Lecter’s face and he saw the man’s lips were still in a small smile. “I’ll call GWU and tell them that I’m not coming back.” Then he added with a bit of afterthought, “Bye.”

He hung up and turned the phone to silent, wanting any excuse not to talk to the Chief of Staff.

“Well, it’s taken care of now.” He glanced over at the extra glass Lecter had brought with him. “I’ll—I’ll take some now.”

Lecter’s smile became a humoured grin and Will choked out a pleased laugh as he accepted the glass of wine being poured for him; the bottle said ‘Gewürztraminer’, and he nodded as though he understood what that was. Will had absolutely no knowledge of wine and could only pretend to have an appreciation for it, though this one was definitely the best one Lecter had served him yet. Will wasn’t sure if he found it luxurious or pretentious that the president offered wine during their lunches together, the immaculate meals that had forever ruined his standards for anything that could be presented to him at a restaurant. And those were only the one course deals—he’d heard staffers gushing about the lavish multiple course dinner parties Lecter held. Will wasn’t really sure what could possibly make up a dinner so big it had to be served in rounds, but he was sure that people who wore three piece suits could find a way to make it so.

Lecter’s eyes were on the windows streaked with rain and Will watched his face, allowing the satisfaction the President felt to seep into himself as well. His breathing relaxed and he didn’t have a single nervous tic to manifest; one of his fingers traced along the bony knob of his knee through his trousers as he sipped at the wine.

“Gewürztraminer is best in cooler climates,” the president announced after a few minutes of silence, swirling his wine slightly before looking down at it. “I am most fond of Gewurtztraminer d’Alsace from France, as the variety of grapes have a high natural sugar, best suited for dessert wine, though today’s triumph needed to be a bit more dry than what the French had to offer.”

Will studied his glass in the light, uncertain what he was looking for but damned sure to at least act as though he knew what he liked about it. He filed the details about the wine away for later, hoping that they were important and not just bullshit supposed to impress him.

“Are you supposed to drink on the job with employees?” he asked as Lecter refilled his glass halfway.

“I am an unorthodox president,” the other man replied simply as he refilled his own glass.

“Perhaps that’s what Washington needs.”

“Perhaps.”
Will held his glass out for a moment and the president’s smile returned as he clinked his own against Will’s.

“I’ll clean my office at GWU out on Saturday.” He quickly added, “If you don’t need me for anything.”

Lecter as he asked, “There is nothing scheduled for either of us this afternoon. Would you permit me to come with you?”

“Are you sure you can just go?” Will raised his eyebrows, searching out any hidden agenda in Lecter’s expression.

“Today’s extra security has already been paid for. No point in wasting it.” Lecter focused on brushing a piece of lint off the knee of his trousers. “I’ve been curious about your work at the university.”

“Sure. If you…if you really want to.” Will felt…pride? that the president was actually interested in something about him, that he was being viewed as a person with something to contribute, not just another face in his office. “Don’t expect any lectures, though. Those aren’t free.”

Lecter nodded, glancing over. “Nor should they be. Your mind shouldn’t be freely given.”

It was odd to be on equal footing with someone for once—well, as equal as he was capable of—and Will relaxed in the chair, drinking the wine and watching the rain outside.

*****

They arrived at the university slightly past three thirty that afternoon, the smaller than usual, but nevertheless impressive black motorcade coming to a stop at the cleared front entrance of the university. With the rain still pouring, the majority of the students had taken shelter indoors, a few walking to classes beneath newspapers and umbrellas, only one actually noticing the procession of fortified Cadillacs and pulling out his phone to take a picture.

Will exhaled in annoyance; it wasn’t as though he expected he’d be able to enter the school without some sort of attention, but traveling with the President of the United States made anonymity absolutely impossible. He knew that by the end of the walk to his office, they’d be swamped with various students and faculty looking to have pictures taken or harangue them over ‘foreign trade policy’ and ‘socialist government healthcare’. As they stepped out the oversized vehicle, an open umbrella was pressed into his hand; as someone who didn’t use umbrellas, Will frankly had little clue what the proper etiquette was and was completely embarrassed when Lecter took the umbrella carefully from his hand, holding it between the two of them.

“You’ll learn,” the president said before Will could apologise.

There was patience in Lecter’s tone and Will immediately found himself memorising the way he held the umbrella down to every minute detail. The situation felt so entirely surreal as he and the President, surrounded by Secret Service, walked side by side to the red brick establishment; the President made a few comments about the architecture and the statuary they passed and Will simply nodded, sneaking two loose aspirin from his pocket and swallowed them dry. He could feel an oncoming headache and there was also the small tugging of heat that threatened a false fever. ‘Not here!’ he angrily thought to himself; he didn’t need the President or Secret Service to think he was relapsing—it was just a cold!

It wasn’t long before the dean of the university found them, penetrating the layer of security with an
enthusiastic smile and a wave of his faculty ID badge. “Mr President, it’s a huge honour to have you here at GWU. We’re always happy to accommodate you.”

Lecter graciously paused on their way to Will’s office and shook the dean’s hand. “Thank you. I am very fortunate to have met one of your finest employees. I’m sorry to have taken him from you.”

“Well, he knows the job is always here for him if he wants a break from the busy schedule of Washington.” The dean clapped Will on the shoulder as though they had any semblance of a friendly relationship. “We’re going to miss you, Will.”

Will made a noncommittal noise, very uncomfortable; here he was regarded as a loose cannon and aside from the desire to figure out what it was that he actually did to make the perfect campaign, there was little interest at having him around.

Lecter spoke before anything became awkward. “I’m afraid we’re under a tight schedule. Please allow my office to contact you for a full tour at a later date.”

“We’d love that, Mr President.” The dean gave him a tight smile. “Let us know if you need anything, Will.”

Will grit his teeth. “Sure.”

Agent Price had been sent ahead of the group to clear Will’s office and when they reached the office, he was studying the chalkware bust of Abraham Lincoln next to the mug of pens on Will’s desk.

“Nice digs, Graham.” His smile wasn’t cruel.

“Yeah, the mildew smell is hardly noticeable anymore,” Will muttered.

The President paused and quietly dismissed Price. “Thank you, we’ll be fine.”

Price nodded and bowed out. “We’ll be right outside, Mr President.”

“Alone at last,” Will murmured as the door was shut.

Lecter slipped his hands casually into his pockets. “Would you like help packing anything, Will?”

“Um, no. I should be okay.” Outside there was a clap of thunder. “This’ll be boring, so if you want to…”

“I shall stay.” The president drifted over to Will’s pressboard bookcase. “You have not been in this office long?”

There were a few old banker’s boxes behind Will’s desk and two stacked on top of his file cabinets and Will began to fill them with the contents of his desk drawers. “I…I’m not one to personalise my space. But then, neither are you. The pictures in your office are only there because that’s what people are used to seeing in the background when a president gives an address from the Oval Office.”

Lecter paused, before offering an acknowledging nod. “You are correct.”

Will felt embarrassed that he’d said it aloud. “I can’t turn it off.”

“Nor should you. Are you grateful to be leaving a place that is proud to display their name around your neck?”

Will snorted. “I’m much happier tucked away in your study.”
“Your office,” the President corrected.

“My office.” Will liked the way it felt to get to call the considerably more spacious and certainly better looking office in the White House ‘his’.

Lecter took one of the banker boxes down from the file cabinet and after asking Will if the two week old newspaper still on his desk was acceptable for wrapping up the chalkware Lincoln, began to help Will pack his office. Will had never had anyone help him moving of any kind and while they made no more small talk, he found it…pleasant.

*****

Dr Donald Sutcliffe was a neurosurgeon Hannibal had attended residency with as a surgeon. A good ten years old than Hannibal, Sutcliffe had been a clever acquaintance that had been willing to bend morals and ethics from time to time which made him a good ally to have. Then after he adopted Abigail, Sutcliffe became her physician as Hannibal knew he could talk the other doctor into manipulating his daughter or the medical files if the whim struck. A few years after Hannibal became governor, Sutcliffe had sustained a severe injury to his left hand—his dominant—and had been forced to retire from surgery altogether. Hannibal knew the man well enough to know he couldn’t possibly be satisfied with a life of general practice for high end cliental, that each patient would be a reminder that he was no longer capable of his true potential.

He’d offered him the position of Deputy Chief of Staff in his cabinet the morning after the November election and Sutcliffe had laughed and informed Hannibal that he’d start referring his patients to other doctors the moment he hung up. Sutcliffe was a Republican, but an easily manipulated man and certainly had no problem bending to Hannibal’s political agenda. And so he trotted at Hannibal’s heel like a faithful purebreed.

Though purebred blood was often afflicted with unacceptable temperament.

“Do you have something you wish to say, Donald?” he asked curiously as they walked through the East Wing to the First Lady’s office.

“About Graham. Why is he here?” the fellow doctor adjusted his own tie with his free hand.

What an asinine question. “I wanted him here.”

“But why?” The other man made a face. “It’s just he’s…you know.”

Lecter wanted to hear Sutcliffe say it. “He’s what?”

“A freak. Genius comes at a price and he’s paying pretty high.” Sutcliffe’s voice lowered as they passed an agent. “You know in high school he used to study the local murders in Louisiana and give his opinions to the police, saying he could see into the killer’s mind. That’s what serial killers do. I mean, Jack paid everyone who knew to shut up about it last year, so it’s not news anywhere else, but you knew about that, right?”

“Jack sometimes believes it opportune to keep information such as that from my grasp.” Hannibal offered the man a teasing smile. “Are you worried he’s a serial killer, Donald?”

Sutcliffe held up his hands defensively. “I’m just saying that at the very least he’s unstable. Really unstable. Do you want someone hanging around that thinks he can find killers?”

“He’s quite capable of finding politicians with his intuition and intellect. Is it such a far stretch to imagine he is able to find killers as well?” Hannibal’s fingers twitched.
Sutcliffe was in a mood, however, and didn’t seem willing to drop the matter. “What about his brain ‘thing’ last year? You never told me what he had.”

While he didn’t appreciate Sutcliffe referring to an illness as a ‘brain thing’, Hannibal knew that the other doctor could fully appreciate the ramifications of the diagnosis. “Encephalitis.”

Sutcliffe’s eyes went wide, alarm tightening his voice. “Jesus. Did it give him permanent damage?”

“No.”

Sutcliffe cleared his throat. “I just think that we should all be a careful. At the least, he can damage the administrations image. At the worst, he’s a danger to you and everyone here.”

Hannibal smiled at two young interns who walk past them. “He has passed the Secret Service’s screening process.”

“What do you see in him? Is this some sort of midlife crisis? Wanting to hang out with unstable, possibly dangerous loners? Because we can get you a sports car to satisfy that urge.”

“A midlife crisis?” Hannibal tutted. “No, Donald. I want the absolute best around me at all times.”

They reach the office of the First Lady and a Marine opened the door for Hannibal and his Deputy Chief of Staff, who quickly added, “I’m just looking out for you. We can talk about it later, though.”

At the back of the busy office is Abigail sitting patiently at her desk and in a way that always surprised him, the other people in the room seemed to fade, his entire focus on her instead.

“Hello, Dad.” Her blue eyes gleamed. “Good afternoon, Dr Sutcliffe. How are you?”

Sutcliffe adjusted his tie again. “Well, Abigail. And yourself?”

“Well,” she mimicked.

Hannibal frowned minutely, but recovered without any indication that he’d ever been upset. “Abigail, shall we start the meeting?”

Her attention moved to him. “Yes, we probably should.”

She brushed her hand affectionately into his as they walked into the conference room which stood to attention as soon as they entered.

*****

Will stood in the feed store closest to Wolf Trap, two very large bags of dog kibble on the rugged countertop at the front register. He’d been coming here for years and they often stayed open later
than usual if he called ahead. The large building smelt of grains and hay—much nicer than the city.
The President’s weekly radio address began to play against the back wall and the manager abandoned ringing up the dog food to turn it off.

“Too bad we couldn’t elect someone who speaks English, right?”

“Don’t talk about him like that.”

“What?”

Will hadn’t realised he’d said his thoughts out loud, but didn’t want to back down from snobbery he’d had to listen to day in and day out last year. “Don’t talk about him like that. He’s a great president. And English is his first language.”

The feed store manager looked taken aback at Will’s sudden aggression and took a step back from the register. “Okay. Didn’t know you were one of those bleeding heart Dems.”

“I’m not.” Will lowered his eyes as he dug the money out of his wallet. “48.52, right?”

“Yeah.”

Will set handed over three very crisp twenties he’d taken out of an ATM before leaving DC, his fingers tapping the side of his thigh anxiously as his change was counted out. After he carried the two large bags of food to his station wagon, he sat in the driver’s seat for a moment, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

‘Well, just fucked that one up,’ Will thought sourly to himself, already mapping out the route to the next nearest feed store to buy his dog food from. As he started the car and pulled out onto the almost empty road, he turned the radio on, fiddling with the stations to find the President’s address.

*****

Abigail was ecstatic that Marissa had been allowed to come over to visit her at her new home. It had taken a few months to convince her father that she could afford to spend time with her and he’d agreed she could come over after school and stay for dinner, a very generous concession considering how much he disliked her best friend. She’d practically been vibrating as they’d picked up Marissa’s badge from the Secret Service office downstairs, unable to contain her excitement that she was to be reunited with the girl she felt closest to. Neglecting a tour of the White House in favour of dragging her friend to her bedroom, she had every intention of sharing the secret crawl space she’d found in her closet, but Marissa’s attention was already on the reproduction print hanging on the wall.

“Abigail, do you still have that fucking naked painting?”

“La Grande Odalisque is a classic, you uncultured bitch,” Abigail spat out, loving the way the words felt on her tongue. Her father would gut her if he ever heard her speaking this way.

Marissa smirked. “Why would your dad even let you have this?

“I thought she was a princess when I was little, okay?” she repeated for what felt like the thousandth time.

Her best friend rolled her eyes, staring at the hollow Odalisque’s eyes. “Does he ever tell you ‘no’?”

Abigail’s mind briefly thought about wanting to chopping off a former tutor’s fingers so she could hear her scream and how her father had said, ‘No, we don’t have the time tonight. We shall just
Marissa gave a condescending smile. “Gross.

Abigail made a face. “It’s not like that! God!”

“Whatever, I don’t really care about you and your pervert art.” She looked out the windows to the Ellipsis and gardens. “Oh shit, this view is amazing!”

“I know.”

Marissa knew better than to take pictures with her cellphone—being a politician’s daughter as well meant that she understood security protocols and she didn’t have to be reminded that photos inside the Residence were strictly forbidden. They were quiet beside one another and Abigail thought of something funny to say, but as was per usual, Marissa spoke first.

“So does your dad have a Monica?” Marissa had a sly smile.

Abigail wrinkled her nose in disgust. “No, he does not have a ‘Monica’.”

“When’s he going to get one?” Marissa’s face lost its humour and her voice dropped. “Oh, it wasn’t Clarice Starling, right?”

She shook her head. “No, Dad didn’t think about her like that. I think he’s a little too busy running the country to worry about that."

“No one’s too busy.” Marissa’s smile returned and she elbowed Abigail gently in the side. “Do you have a Monica?”

Abigail gagged. “You are so sick.”

There was a polite knock at her door—definitely her father—and she quickly opened it, smiling up at him.

He smiled polite in turn to her and her guest. “Doors remain open, Abigail. Security protocol.”

She nodded. “Okay, Dad.”

Once he left, Marissa declared, “Your dad hates me.”

“He does not.”

“He does. He thinks I’m corrupting you. Turning his good widdle girl into a bad one.” Marissa playfully pinched at her cheeks.

Abigail pushed her friend’s hands away. “No, he doesn’t. My dad knows exactly how bad I am.”

“What does he think we’re doing in here that requires the door staying open? Does he think we’re having sex?” Marissa gave her a leering grin, knowing all the proper buttons to push to get Abigail worked up.

“No! Drinking! He’d probably rather that we were having sex than drinking.” She glared at her friend. “And that’s your fault. I told you he can smell it on us when we drink.”

Marissa shrugged, sitting down on the guest bed. “It was cheap beer. Anyone could smell it.”
"He could smell it in our skin." Abigail rolled her eyes petulantly. "Anyway, it's not a big deal. It's not like we're doing anything bad, right?"

Marissa jumped to her feet and walked to the open door, ignoring the Odalisque’s judging eyes and holding out a hand to her. “Give me a tour, First Lady. Show me your abode.”

*****

Hannibal absolutely loathed Marissa Schurr. The daughter of Bernice Schurr and Representative Nathaniel Schurr, she had somehow managed to catch Abigail’s attention at the age of eight and no matter how many discussions he had about his displeasure of her, Abigail refused to part from her. When she was a child, Hannibal had rationalised this behaviour as Abigail’s craving for attention he wasn’t able to provide her with while she was at school, and as a result, spent more time with her, building rituals and traditions to bind them tighter together as a family. When she was an adolescent, Hannibal had rationalised this behaviour as her attempts to fit in and pass for normal, and he’d attempted to steer her towards group activities in school where she could learn the necessary skills needed to blend into the human world. Most recently he suspected that this friendship was a form of rebellion against him, a subconscious desire to test his limits; he knew that all teenagers sought to challenge their parents' authority and he found it fascinating that Abigail might test him in a way that she wasn’t being the ‘rude’ one.

He knew Abigail certainly didn’t see Marissa as an ally and if she wanted her for a sexual relationship, that would have already come to pass and she would have abandoned Marissa along the wayside. No, this was a deeper fixation and one Hannibal had every intention of correcting before the end of the year. Marissa sauntered around as though she was entitled to special privileges; she was vulgar, a product of too much money and not enough discipline.

But ever the loving and dutiful parent, Hannibal would give his daughter whatever she wanted. The dinner tonight was pizza, though not some greasy, plebeian affair that had been ordered from the pizza shop two blocks away. He kneaded the pizza dough that he’d made before breakfast and allowed to rise during the day, the aromatic tomato sauce having finished simmering on the stove minutes earlier; the oven was heating with the pizza stone and small ingredient bowls that held crumbled sausage, chopped basil, and grated buffalo mozzarella had been arranged carefully.

Abigail drifted through the doorway, smelling faintly of her friend’s cheap body spray. “Dad, would you like help with dinner?”

"No, you should tend to your guest."

She looked over the food arranged on the counter and he knew that she was tempted to invite herself to a quick snack of some of the toppings. “She won't mind if I leave her alone for a while to help you.”

He continued kneading the dough on the floured counter. No, keep her company. I shall call you when it's ready."

She put her hands behind her back, resisting the temptation of the food before her. “I love you, Daddy."

"I love you, too, Abigail,” he promised and sent her on her way.

When they all assembled an hour later in the dining room, Hannibal was pleased with the meal for the night; as he held a serving set that had belonged to his uncle and Lady Murasaki, he asked his daughter’s friend,
“Marissa, how many slices would you like?”

“Oh, I don't eat meat anymore, Dr Lecter,” she said matter-of-factly.

Abigail looked completely dumbfounded and he paused in serving; were he a lesser man, he would have shown his displeasure at her lack of gratitude.

“Abigail didn't inform me your eating habits had changed,” he said instead, his voice completely void of emotion.

“It’s the macrobiotic diet. It's a lot better than the standard American diet. It's really good for detoxing,” the young woman replied before taking a sip of water.

Hannibal’s eyes met Abigail’s and he saw the fear lurking in the depths of her blue.

"I'll make you something else. Can you eat fruit?" his daughter asked quickly.

Marissa smiled at Abigail. “Yeah.”

“Come on, you can show me what you can eat.” Abigail gave him an apologetic look as she led Marissa back to the kitchen.

Hannibal lowered his arms for a moment, exhaling sharply through his nose as his fingers flexed tightly around the serving set in his hands; he already didn't enjoy having to make pizza of all things in his kitchen and now because of this obnoxious brat’s selfishness, he had food that would become leftovers, disturbing the organisation in his carefully arranged refrigerator. 'I'll serve it to Abigail and Will for lunch tomorrow,' he decided, finding relief in his quick solution. But this was Marissa’s nature to be so disruptive in his life and in Abigail’s, and he blamed himself for allowing it to continue for so long.

As he listened to the sound of the two teenagers in the kitchen, he returned his attention to the pizza and served three thinly cut slices on his daughter’s plate, spending the extra time to carefully arrange them in a fan position against the trio of Picholine olives and fresh basil sprig, taking it as a form of meditative duty toward the one he loved the most. When they returned to the dining room, Abigail trailing dutifully behind young Miss Schurr with a bowl of crudités, he was carefully placing three small slices of his own plate and offered them a polite smile upon their presence.

“Did you find something for dinner, Marissa?” he inquired.

“Yes, thank you.”

Pleased that the dinner was returning to a pattern of some normalcy, he inquired. “Shall we eat?”

“Thank you for fixing my plate for me, Dad.” She gave him the demure smile she’d mastered as a child, a wordless way of communicating, ‘we killed this’.

“You are quite welcome, Abigail.” His eyes flicked over to their guest. “Marissa, is there anything else we can get for you?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks.”

He watched Marissa try to hide a smirk at Abigail using a fork and knife on her pizza and he felt his pulse rise in response to his anger. It almost made him laugh that a young woman he hardly ever saw could trigger such hatred within him.
The sound of an unfamiliar ringtone broke the silence and he had to assume it was Marissa’s phone, which she confirmed when she pulled the pink cased device out of her jeans’ pocket. One of the aspects of political life that Hannibal struggled to become comfortable with was the need for everyone to remain connected constantly by cellphone. With the fluctuating political climate, safety and security, phones and Blackberries were the only way to communicate instantly. As Marissa’s father was a member of Congress, it wouldn’t be a surprise if she was being informed of an emergency. He and Abigail at least had the courtesy of putting their phones into silent mode, however.

“Oh my god, this bitch won't stop calling me!” Marissa dropped her phone to the floor in a fit, stabbing a cherry tomato with her fork.

Hannibal managed not to clench his jaw over the outburst, trying to think of something pleasant disemboweling her in the manner of a Pazzi.

Abigail frowned. “Who is it?”

Marissa gave an exasperated huff. “Freddie Lounds. She's calling around trying to get an exclusive with all your friends.”

“Well, good thing I only have you,” Abigail teased.

Hannibal watched Marissa’s face go from surprised to fond of Abigail; disposing of her would be so much easier if she didn't care for his daughter as well.

“Yeah, well, she's been talking to some of the other kids.”

“Who?” he inquired, his voice neutral.

Marissa didn’t meet his eyes and he wondered if she sensed the danger he was to her. “Oh um, well most of the kids know better than to talk about other students to press, but there are a few that are new and don't know any better. They don't know the rules.”

While Hannibal still had no intention of sparing Marissa of what could be her only fate, he was respectful that she wished protect Abigail from outsiders as much as he did. Quickly he eliminated a few different methods of death he’d been saving for her. He could be a merciful man, after all.

"Some of the senator and rep kids. Newbies elected."

He nodded. “I see.”

"I'm not talking to her. She's horrible. And friends don't talk about their friends, especially with, like, gossip."

"Thanks," Abigail replied and Hannibal almost frowned at the casual appreciation.

"You'd do it for me," Marissa said to his daughter.

"You are very considerate, Marissa,” Hannibal complimented.

Marissa shrugged. “Freddie’s a bitch, anyways.”

Hannibal returned his attention to his slice of pizza, cutting off the end, imagining he was sawing through her orbital socket with a blunt scalpel. After dinner, Hannibal returned to the West Wing to look through Will’s office; now that he was officially staying, his hours had been increased from
twelve to fifteen. Clarice had worked eighteen hours a day as aides often did, but Hannibal could trust the younger man to accomplish much more in the shorter timespan together. And he knew that there was always a chance that Will would become rebellious if asked to work the full eighteen. Jack had made it very clear that the young man was very attached to the strays he had collected and if Will didn’t have the opportunity to spend time with them, he’d have motive to return to the university. Jack didn’t really care about Will burning out, Hannibal was sure of that, but if Hannibal wanted to extinguish Will, it would be of his own doing.

An exceptional amount of cheap plastic Bic pens stood in the julep cup Jack had left for him; it wasn’t to Hannibal’s personal style and he was sorely tempted to remove it and replace it with something that was a little more dignified, but he resisted. He could always use the opportunity later.

He could smell Will so deeply in this room, as the man was a composed of aged paper and and bulk plastics, cheap aftershaves and worn leather, fear and anxiety. It cloaked everything and he sat down at the desk, trying to imagine himself as Will. He wished the other man was here so that he could taste that scent, heated skin that was no longer sick but still consuming medications. There had to be a scenario in which that desire could be sated. He’d have to think about it though.

He was eager for Will to accept that they were meant to be friends, wondering if perhaps that was why Will had decided to stay. Friends should feel a magnetic pull towards one another and surely Will had noticed it. It was conceivable that was the reason Abigail felt drawn to Marissa, though that was a somewhat distressing thought. Hannibal would rather that connection be felt with someone of better character.

Marissa left while he was still in Will’s office and while he knew it was rude not to see her off, he found himself no actually caring. Marissa served no purpose in his life but to aggravate him and the sooner she came to an end, the better.

In the morning when Abigail joined him in the kitchen, they greeted one another and she smiled, delicately resting her hand on his arm for a moment, no doubt an apology for Marissa’s behaviour last night and he wondered if she felt uneasy about her friend’s safety. As he began to cook breakfast, grateful he wouldn’t be wasting anything because Will always ate whatever was set before him with complete appreciation, he considered how he’d solve the problem young Miss Schurr presented.

Abigail poured his coffee, mixing in just a touch of sugar, and then a cup for Will, stirring in a hint of cinnamon before dusting the sugar in. Both cups were set out on the counter, the handle of his turned towards him and the handle to Will’s turned towards the doorway; Hannibal thought it was charming she would pair their coffees together in such a manner and he made a note to find some equally delightful to amuse her in turn.

“It’s unfortunate we couldn’t have Marissa here for breakfast this morning,” she said, ending her words with a sigh.

Opportunity presented, Hannibal removed a few links of sausage from the refrigerator, giving her a teasing smile. “We shall have to settle for Miriam instead.”

She let out a small giggle behind her hand as he put the meat into the frying pan.

*****

Will lingered behind Lecter as he signed pieces of paper, magazines, and newspapers for the filming crew and producers of ‘Meet the Press’; the President had just finished an interview, which Will had thought went nicely. There were a few people who tried to start a conversation with him, but he
deflected quickly by rummaging in the messenger bag, muttering how sorry he was, but ‘the President needs another pen’ and he’d hold it out to the oblivious Lecter. After the signing and picture taking came to an end, Will collected the pen the President had actually been using and slipped it into the front of the bag. They walked almost side by side as he quietly recited various text messages that had been sent by the President’s office, Agent Katz bumping into his elbow twice in the time it took them to reach the green room.

The green room was small and even smaller with the entourage that the President was accompanied by. There was an awkward, ugly patterned loveseat crammed into a corner and Lecter motioned for him to sit, so he did, watching as the President spoke quietly with Jack before he came to join him. Will handed over the President’s ipad without being asked, tucking his arms in to create more room as he stared at a small crack in the baseboard by his feet. It was nearly comical how close he had to sit next to the President at times, as if the people organising these events weren’t aware of how cramped the quarters they provided were; but Lecter always handled the matter with such dignity and while he would have been fine standing, he knew it would be rude to turn down the President.

They were shoulder to shoulder and Will huffed in annoyance, his fingers gripping at his knees anxiously. He hated being here with all these people and he would welcome any distraction from their presence, their small minds trying to seep into his. And of course, Will saw that he should have been careful with what he’d wished for. Movement by his thigh caught his attention and he realised that the President was tilting the ipad towards him so he could look at the screen; he looked down and the first thing his eyes were assaulted with was the word,

**CANNIBALS**

It had been spray painted on an average looking house in a photograph on Tattle-Politics, the bold headline above it stating ‘Abigail Lecter’s Childhood Home Vandalised’. As Will studied the picture, he grimly confirmed that yes, it was in fact the Hobbs former house that was in Keedysville, Maryland.

Will pulled off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. “Why won't she just leave Abigail alone?”

Lecter’s tone was quiet. “Abigail is an easy target for Miss Lounds. But Abigail is above such petty attacks at her character.

“But she shouldn’t have to see this.” The defensiveness he felt was heavy and ugly. “And that’s not her childhood home. That’s the Hobbs’ house.”

“You are quite right.”

Will looked at the president’s mouth of the corner of his eye. “You still own it?”

“Yes.”

The words came out sadder than he’d anticipated. “For Abigail?”

“Yes.”

One of the more ‘scandalous’ facts about the President that had come out to a broader public last summer had been the knowledge that Lecter had purchased the Hobbs’ house not long after the FBI closed their investigation on the Maryland Shrike; the money from the sale of all the Hobbs belongings and properties had gone as restitution to the Shrike’s victims’ families. In an interview with Barbara Walters as a candidate, Lecter had explained simply that the house rightfully belonged to Abigail as it had been seized from her without say and when she turned eighteen, she’d be able to
do whatever she wanted with it. Will personally felt it was a macabre permanent reminder of what had happened to her and had he been in Lecter’s place, he would have just torched it. After that interview, Will had assumed the President would have felt pressured to just get rid of it, but apparently still held it in wait for Abigail to come of age.

Lecter’s voice was low, private amongst the loud chatter of the people around them. “What does your house look like, Will?”

It seemed random enough a question but Will had no doubt that Lecter was fishing for a conversation that would be personal.

“I’m sure you have photos of it in my file,” he said coolly.

A slight tilt of the President’s head. “I do. But I would like to hear you describe it to me. I would like to know how you interpret what you see.”

Will couldn’t understand how no one in the room could see them at that moment, the only two people in the room sitting, the most important man in the country not engaging in history changing decisions. It was as though he could turn off his allure at whim, becoming completely invisible as everyone turned to Jack for guidance. For the first time that he’d been around the President, Will made eye contact and found himself unable to look away.

“Sometimes, at night…I leave the lights on in my little house. And walk across the flat fields. When I look back from a distance, the house is like a boat on the sea. It’s really the only time I feel safe.”

The words left his mouth tasting impossible.

“Safe,” the President echoed.

Will’s cheeks burned with shame, his eyes looking to his lap. “Yes.”

“I imagine the White House would look much the same way if there were not streetlights interfering. A peaceful ship adrift on the water.” The other man’s voice was low, almost hypnotic. “Is that was you want, Will? To be alone on the water?”

Will glanced back up to Lecter’s face—he could see from the way the President looked at him that they could be in a room of a hundred-thousand people screaming at the top of their lungs and Will would be the sole focus. And so he spoke.

“I’ve been alone my whole life—being alone on a boat wouldn’t be a big deal. In the middle of the ocean. Only yourself. And silence.” His voice came out as the low murmur of a storm on the horizon, viewed from the humid bayou.

That’s what Hannibal Lecter’s eyes looked like—a lightening storm on the horizon.

“Would it make you feel safe?”

Will could nearly see every word illuminated on the underbelly of the storm clouds, a thunder that only he could hear. He swallowed hard, looking at the lightening.

“Not any more than anything else ever has.”

There was no pity or weakness when the President spoke next. “I wish to make you feel safe, Will.”

From the opposite side of the room, there was a loud laugh between Agents Zeller and Price. Will inhaled sharply and drew back, the spell suddenly broken. The world had returned and the could be
seen by everyone again.

“I don’t think it was appropriate of me to bring up what I said.”

Lecter’s eyes were human once more and Will had to look away. “Why not?”

Will’s shoulders moved oddly in an aborted shrug. “Because…I’m complaining about something that’s all in my head and you’ve actually lived that fear.”

The President was quiet for a beat too long and Will’s first instinct was the expect the worst—hiss insults and abrupt departures. But Lecter did none of that—of course he did none of that—instead talking in the ever calm and soothing tone he used for everything.

“Will, I must ask you to never belittle your own instincts because you feel you are stepping outside of the customary boundaries of civility. Your concern as to my feelings is appreciated, but I do not wish for you to pity me.”

“I don’t pity you.” He gripped at his knees, palms sweaty and wishing for the privacy to dry swallow the aspirin in his pocket. “I just don’t want to be insensitive to you.”

“You are capable of being cruel to me, I know that. But I don’t believe you would be so intentionally.”

Will blinked, having never thought of himself as cruel, but before he could protest the new title, Agent Katz came to them, taking away their privacy.

“Mr President, we’re ready to leave.” Katz gave Will a smirk, something she usually only saved for the other two agents in the President’s daytime detail; he wasn’t sure if he should be honoured or not.

“Thank you, Agent Katz,” Lecter said politely and she left them.

“I am permitted to care for your own sense of well being, am I not?” Lecter asked as he stood.

Will’s eyes were carefully hidden by his glass frames and he said sourly, “I don’t need people feeling sorry for me.”

“I have never felt sorry for anyone. Not even myself. I lack your gift of empathy.”

Then the President smiled at him as though it was their joke and before Will could explain that he didn’t understand why it was supposed to be funny, Secret Service was whisking them out the door and off to another engagement across town.

*****

Abigail was sitting in his chair, spinning it from side to side. It wasn’t a very dignified way to act in the Oval Office but from the look on her face, Hannibal could tell that word of Freddie Lounds’ article had reached her.

“Did you see?” she asked darkly.

He came to stand beside her, shutting the laptop that had been opened to the Tattle-Politics homepage. “I did.”

She looked up at him with fiery eyes. “If I tore out her tongue and eyes, do you think it would point back to me?”
Hannibal smiled, amused. “Will is concerned for your well being.”

“He doesn't need to be. She’s just doing this to get a response.” She brought the chair to a halt. “Why do you keep it for me?”

Because it was a shrine to where Abigail Hobbs ended and Abigail Lecter began. “To remind you were you are from. To allow you the choice to sell it or keep it when you turn eighteen.”

“I don’t want it. It’s…it’s…please, Dad. Just sell it. That man’s life is nothing I want responsibility over. Please.” She was swiftly against him, tucking herself small in his arms. When she spoke again, it was not in her English but in their Lithuanian. “I did not come from him or that house. I was reborn. I am your Mischa and I am not the child that lived there.”

She shivered in his arms and he kissed the top of her head. “I can see that, Abigail. Never doubt that I know who you truly are.”

///***///

(Hannibal holding the umbrella at GWU)
Chapter End Notes

Chapter Seven

Hannibal enjoyed Alana’s presence at the dinner table and in his kitchen and after he poured her one of the remaining beers that had been made just for her pleasure, they fell into an easy routine of preparing the night’s meal. She smelt of the expensive perfume Bedelia purchased for her every year on her trips to Paris, as well as the faint warmth of skin and goat’s milk soap. He could drink her in every moment of the day and never grow tired of her; of course he kept a respectable distance when necessary so that he wouldn’t infer anything more into their relationship than what was already there. That didn’t mean he couldn’t play with a situation, however.

He watched her hawkishly as he breaded small cutlets for the night’s dinner. “You know those candidates thought we were having an affair. Why didn’t we?”

Her lips held a smirk. “Because you were already having an affair. And you were just getting started with Abigail. I…it wasn’t my place.”

He gave a small nod and took the cutlets to the hot pan they were to cook in.

It was true. Despite his admiration and fondness for Alana, she could never be anything more than the beautiful woman who graced his life with her presence. She would never be someone to see the world from his eyes and for that he was truly sorry. There were days he longed to touch her, to consume her, but he was aware that there was nothing positive about their end game if they went down that particular path. She would get too close and while she might only see the hairline fractures of his world, there was also the possibility that she would see his true self and he’d be left with no choice but to kill her. Her death wasn’t something he looked forward to.

“Hi, Abigail,” Alana greeted as Abigail drifted into the kitchen, a shadow that lingered along the walls.

Abigail’s smile was small. “Hello, Alana.”

While she might not be aware of it, Abigail almost always channeled an aloof distance when she was around Alana; Hannibal knew his daughter was territorial and viewed the other woman as a threat to their family, a reaction she’d had from the moment they’d met. And Alana, while warm and friendly to his daughter, had a certain hesitancy around her as well. There was no closeness between them and Hannibal supposed this had its benefits.

Abigail leaned into him, her head resting on his shoulder, a small and guarded position, seeking his comfort.

“Want me to set the table, Daddy?” she murmured.

She was upset at Alana’s presence, her patience limited, and he could tell from the look Alana was giving her, the other woman didn’t approve of Abigail reverting back to the childhood colloquialism that everyone had insisted she stop using. He resisted the urge to bait Abigail into a verbal spar with their guest and kissed her forehead instead; he could toy with his daughter’s emotions later, when Alana wasn’t there.

“I would appreciate that, Abigail. Thank you.” He watched the breaded cutlets slowly brown.

She nuzzled her cheek against him. “Can I pick the music, too?”

“Are you tense, Hannibal?” Alana asked curiously.

Abigail bristled against him, not welcoming the aide’s intrusion into their moment. “I’ll put on ‘Messiah’. I think we need something with an aspiration towards D major.”

“The key of light and glory. Worthy is the Lamb.”

“I know that my Redeemer liveth,” she replied before leaving his side to retrieve the flatware and linen napkins to be set at the table.

Hannibal’s eyes met Alana’s and she looked away, busying herself with the beer and cutting the carrots. His smile held a bittersweet edge for a moment before he invited her into a new conversation about the success of the marriage equality act he’d signed two days after his inauguration; as she told him that about the number of letters Bedelia’s office had received in praise of the law, he tried to imagine a world where she and Abigail had a trusting relationship. But he couldn’t, as it wouldn’t be in their nature to ever completely trust one another. The cuts of the accountant he’d breaded filled the kitchen with a mouthwatering scent and he watched Alana inhale the air, a smile forming on her lips as she talked to him about House of Cards and he pretend he knew more about the show than what he’d read online.

He caught Abigail lingering in the doorway behind Alana, her eyes distant and looking at the meat in the pan. She was restless and it stirred something in him as well. Perhaps a hunt was in order.

*****

The White House’s Easter Prayer Breakfast was on April fourth, a Wednesday, and brought about the end of the holiday celebrations. Will was relieved it was finally over as he was getting sick of looking at the pastel egg decorations and white Easter lilies placed in lieu of the normal flower arrangements. Easter just brought back memories of disappointment and shame; sometimes Dad would take him to the closest church for Easter service and they’d sit in the back pew dressed in threadbare work clothes that were slightly wrinkled and Dad would be trying to work off a hangover. He’d stay for the occasional Easter egg hunt and feel like a leper the entire time as he hunted for hardboiled eggs that were dyed in sad, understated purples and yellows, all the other kids giving him horrible looks in their brand new Sunday best.

Today he was wearing his favourite jacket and trousers, opting for a hunter green tie he’d bought at a rummage sale two years ago. The room hosting the breakfast was filled with various religious leaders and politicians, all proving to one another that they weren’t sinners. It made Will’s stomach churn. He wasn’t really needed here, but god forbid the President spill something on his robin’s egg blue suit and Will wasn’t there with a fucking wet wipe and stain removing pen. At least he had the luxury of lurking from the sidelines, nibbling on paté on toast that the President had made for him to snack on that morning. Will had gained three pounds since coming to work at the White House, something his physician was sure to be thrilled about.

Lecter and Vice President Du Maurier spoke before their guests about Christ, sacrifice, and determination; the entire time Lecter stood at the podium, reciting Bible passages Will had picked out for him, Will couldn’t help but notice how clinical it was and the moment he understood why, he couldn’t help but smile nervously. The breakfast continued without a hitch and no one else seemed to see the secret that Will could. Once all the proper hands were shook and the breakfast came to an official end, Will shadowed the President, handing over the alcohol wipes so that he could disinfect himself from anything he might have picked up from all the contact. Lecter had commented the morning before that he’d never been around so many sick people as he had been since he got into politics. Will had in turn launched into a quick collection of assorted illness statistics he’d read about in the various brochures in his physician’s office; he’d realised too late that Lecter had been joking
and he’d felt like an absolute fool, but the other man hadn’t mocked him, just elaborated further on what Will had said.

In the Oval Office, the President had dismissed everyone except Will, requesting a lint roller for his suit. As the older man began to clean his suit of assorted accumulations, Will averted his attention to a flower arrangement on the low coffee table; it always felt like he was spoiling the magic of what made the President so perfect. Will made a face. He wasn’t used to seeing people on those terms and the thought of him being an average human seemed to conflict too much in his mind.

Upon handing back the lint roller, the President spoke. “I appreciate the additional Psalms you found for me this morning. My speech writers are not as adept at finding proper Bible verses to suit my needs. Under normal circumstances I would ask Abigail, but she was busy.”

“She’s memorised the Bible?” That seemed a logical leap to make.

“Before she was twelve.”

“She wanted to impress you.” Will knew what it was like to want to impress a father.

Lecter nodded once. “I believe so.”

There was a breath’s pause and then—

“You’re not actually a believing Catholic, are you?” The words sounded abusively gauche coming out of his mouth and he felt disgusted he was even saying them.

“No.” The President’s eyes looked him over before turning his attention to a manuscript on his desk, but there was an odd quirk on his lips. “And you believe in nothing as well.”

Will nodded, feeling almost desperate for Lecter to understand that he hadn’t been trying to accuse him of anything. “And you can’t tell anyone because no one wants a president without religion.”

Another nod. “No one wants a president who has no god to answer to.”

“Who do you answer to?”

The President’s fingers lingered on the photo frame of his daughter. “Myself.”

‘No, he answers to her,’ Will thought to himself, but it wasn’t a bad thought.

“What does the rest of your family think?” he asked curiously; discussing religion was an off-limits topic in most situations, but he was slowly becoming accustomed to simply voicing his thoughts as the President had requested he do.

“They are unaware. Aside from Abigail, you are the only one who knows.” He paused. “The Catholic church has always been at odds with most of my personal beliefs.”

“You’re a man of science. And you don’t want to spend your life mourning things,” he murmured.

“Very correct, Will.”

The door opened and Jack jogged in, motioning to the desk as disorganised papers fluttered in his hand. “Hannibal, I have Secretary Clinton on the phone.”

Will knew when to make an exit. “I’ll be in my office.”
“If you will excuse me,” the President said, as though he had to apologise to Will.

Will nodded, taking the lint roller along with him, though he spared a second glance to the most powerful man in the world. Lecter nodded to him once more as though reassuring and Will shut the door behind him.

*****

The following morning Will brought along a wrapped package from his refrigerator; he felt stupid when the parcel was passed through the x-ray machine and two fish showed up on the screen. He’d spent the entire morning at the house smirking over the fish, thinking of how funny it would be to give a fake-Catholic a fish to eat for Friday, but now he wasn’t even sure if the joke was that funny in the first place and he worried his cheek between his teeth. Maybe it was really just mocking? Was he mocking them? Was this rude—

“Good morning, Will.”

Will startled at the sound of the President walking along beside him.

“Oh, you’re not in the kitchen,” was the first thing that he could think to say.

“Not yet. My morning is starting later than expected.” His eyes glanced down at the newspaper wrapped parcel in Will’s hand.

“I know you aren’t really Catholic, but I thought you might like something for Friday.” Will practically shoved the it into the President’s hands.

Lecter inhaled slightly, balancing the package in his hands, before smiling, guessing what was wrapped inside. “You caught this.”

Embarrassed, Will explained, “I had a good day catching Sunday.”

“You must come to dinner as our guest of honour. I insist.”

“I suppose I could push some things around.” He followed Lecter into the kitchen.

Abigail was in the kitchen reading off her Blackberry when they entered.

“Abigail, look what our Will has brought us.” Lecter handed over the package and she opened the paper.

“You caught these?”

Will nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yes.”

“You’re sharing your kill with us?”

Will was no hunter. “They’re…they’re just fish.”

“Not just fish, Will,” the President insisted, then looked to his daughter. “I’ve invited him to join us for dinner on Friday.”

“What kind of fish are they?” Abigail asked.

“Brown trout.”
“I already know what I want you to cook! I’m going to set up a marinade.”

As Abigail began selecting spices from the impressive collection in the pantry, Lecter’s arm brushed against his briefly. Will wasn’t completely sure it was an accident.

Lecter smiled to him as he began assemble the morning’s breakfast. “Thank you, Will. This was so generous of you.”

*****

Hannibal was holding a solitary conference with Jack in one of the few unused offices in the East Wing; the meeting wasn’t secret, but things always went smoother when plotting could be done in privacy. Will had been barricaded in his office, running menial tasks that while Hannibal required done, there as a distraction; he was most likely circling parts of the transcript from Aunt Jacqueline’s filmed White House tour.

There was a knock on the door to the office and Agent Katz entered, holding a simple envelope that hadn’t been opened, per his request. “Mr President, you asked us to inform you if Abel Gideon sent anything. It’s passed the security clearance.”

He accepted the letter, dismissing the agent. “Thank you.”

As predicted, Jack narrowed his eyes slightly at the letter. “You’re not going to read it?”

“It’s for Abigail,” Hannibal said simply as he tucked it into his jacket’s inner pocket.

“Are you…going to give it to her?”

He didn’t see why not. “It is her mail.”

His Chief of Staff was no longer smiling. “Hannibal, it was one thing when you were governor. It’s another now that you’re the president.”

“Are there people publicly discussing whom we receive mail from?” Hannibal would not stand for gossips.

Jack’s patience with the matter seemed to be running thin. “Look. I don’t know why he writes to her and I find it really creepy. I don’t know why you allow her to read those letters and I can only hope that you know what they say in them. If this information did become public—and not because of anything our people said, but on his end—can you imagine how it would look?”

“Jack, I assure you that if anyone read the letters they send to one another, one would not find anything alarming. They are merely penpals—“

“The president’s daughter does not become penpals with someone who slaughtered his in-laws at the Thanksgiving dinner table in the Governor’s mansion!” Jack shouted, slamming both of his hands on the desk between them to emphasise his point.

Hannibal was not flustered by this outburst and folded his hands on the desk as he said calmly, “I shall discuss the matter with Abigail, Jack.”

“Make sure you do,” Jack said sourly before leaving the room.

*****

Before Hannibal started on dinner for the night, he handed over the envelope addressed to his
daughter, just to spite Jack. “Abigail, a letter arrived for you.”

“Oh, it's from Uncle Abel!” she said cheerfully and quickly excused herself to get the letter opener from his desk in the living room.

Tonight he was frying strips of tenderised meat that had been seasoned and breaded, his own take on chicken fingers, though they were definitely not made from poultry. While he almost never made her Americanised food, this particular meal was specifically to reminder that he was her favourite—Abel was just a supplementary amusement that she’d forget about entirely if he intercepted the letters.

“What does he say?” he asked as he began heating the oil.

The letter was written on butcher paper in felt tip marker, a safe writing instrument in a hospital for the criminally insane.

“Dearest Abigail,” she read aloud, “I'm writing to you from the library of the hospital as I've recently regained privileges to leave my room here in Baltimore. It is my hope that this letter finds you in good spirits and excellent health. I am in good spirits and excellent health, though the company I keep here is absolutely dreadful. They've cut back on my medication and while I enjoy having a clear mind for once, it allows too much of my fellow residents’ jibber-jabbering to get in.”

“Why do you think they’re cutting back on his medication?” Abigail asked him, looking up from the letter curiously.

“They probably believe he’s making progress.”

She smirked and continued. “I received my issue of the special inaugural edition of The Gotham Tribune. You look stunning! Please tell your father and your aunt that they truly are the most photogenic administration since Jack and Jackie. Bedelia makes a very elegant Vice President, don’t you think? Of course, it would be absolutely shameful if we were to vote as a nation based on good looks alone. Your father’s policies are just as attractive as he is, and that’s what counts.

“How is your father? Is the new office he resides in a burden to him? Does it feel strange for the two of you to live at your place of work? I’m sorry you two cannot share the same wing, though perhaps as a young woman who is slowly blossoming into her own person you are grateful for the distance. Is your staff adequate? I’ve often felt it foolish that to be the First Lady meant to suffer under such silly projects such as the Egg Roll and the Christmas Tree decorations. I can’t imagine you finding glory in the management of the Flower and Candy departments Though perhaps you are eager to approach your father’s former role as host of the house as your own. You certainly have the charm to pull it off!” Abigail smiled. “It’s true. I could be doing so much more with my power.”

“In time,” he promised, adding more seasoning to the pan. “The traditions here are very important to your aunt and it wouldn’t be fair to her if you abandon them.”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “I haven’t seen any pictures of your father's new aide. Are the rumours true that it's Mr Will Graham? I remember meeting him once during Mason Verger's campaign. He is a very unusual man, from what I hear. Absolutely brilliant, though. Do find out if I made an impression on him—I would love to know his thoughts on me.” Abigail giggled. “What a narcissist!”

He smiled as he whisked up a small series of sauces that would compliment the meat.

“I lack your father's artistic ability so my room's walls are inherently bare. I would be forever in your debt if you sent me something to look at.” Abigail looked up to him. “Can I send him one of our official portraits?”
“It is your decision.”

She nodded slowly, thinking. “I will, but unsigned. Anything more might make people wonder.”

“I would have to agree with you.” He placed the first strip of meat into the hot oil.

Her eyes focused on the food cooking and the preparations he was making and her face lit up. “Are you making chicken fingers?”

“I seem to remember they were your favourite when you were little.”

She watched the meat frying. “You never make them.”

“Am I not allowed to spoil you?” he said simply.

Something dangerous flashed in her eyes and her posture shifted slightly. She’d figured out what he was up to and he allowed her to think that he was someone capable of suffering petty jealousy. No, what he felt was more primal—it was ownership and he was yet to meet anyone worth of sharing that responsibility. Certainly not Abel Gideon. Focused on the food, he allowed her to decide how she wanted to handle the situation and she didn’t disappoint.

“I suppose I could read this later. I’d rather just spend the rest of the night with you. We could watch a movie after dinner.”

She was playing along at his game, truly his daughter. He watched triumphantly as she allowed the letter to fall to the floor and she came around to his side of the counter.

*****

“Wanted to make sure you didn’t lose it.”

Will scowled at the invitation he’d been handed by Jack personally to the White House Correspondent’s Dinner at the end of the month. He hated what the whole affair had become—no longer the fun get together of journalists and politicos, it was now a travesty of Hollywood’s who’s-who, reality tv’s stars using their fifteen minutes of fame to walk a red carpet in Washington DC. He’d attended when he was twenty-three, his invitation procured for him by…well, that didn’t matter. He’d also tried to take Alana with him, who had just transferred off to Georgetown, but she’d been out of town that week for a friend’s wedding.

“Nerd prom?” Will called the event by what everyone else in the political world did. “Why am I invited?”

“Because people want to see you, Will.”

“Why?”

Jack’s voice was starting to sound less friendly and more hinting at unspoken threats. “Because they’re interested in you. Show up.”

Will tossed the invite into his inbox. “I have plans that night.”

“Really?” Jack’s voice was a sneer.

“Fuck you, Jack. You don’t get to parade me out to the press,” Will spat, trying to build up the courage to tear the invitation up in front of him.
“You’ll be there for overtime, actually. Hannibal wants you there.”

“I’ll take the night off.”

“Don’t try me, Will,” Jack warned.

Will was in a challenging mood. “Fire me.”

“I no longer have that authority.”

“Chief of Staff can fire anyone.”

Jack actually looked reluctant to say the next part. “Not you.”

Will frowned. Why would the President stop a Chief of Staff from overseeing hiring and firing? “The President took that away from you?”

“No, the privilege only extends to you.”

Will blinked rapidly, shocked. “So I only answer to him.”

“Operating independently. So if you’re going to say ‘no’, you’ll have to tell him.”

Jack left the room and Will grabbed at the invite, tucking it quickly into his satchel. Refusing Jack was one thing, but considering everything the President had done for him, he supposed he could at least consider it. Maybe he could convince Georgia to take his place.

*****

Abel Gideon was allowed a single one inch piece of double-sided tape to affix his official portrait of the First Family to the cold wall of his cell, opposite to where he slept. He was very careful to centre it exactly on the wall, his other magazine cutouts and newspaper clippings from years previous carefully taped on the wall next to his bed. He sat on the edge of his cell’s mattress holding the two pages of the letter he’d been sent along with the photo.

Bringing the letter to his nose, he inhaled slowly, luxuriating in the wonderful crisp, clean scent of the stationary. Abigail had such good taste in paper, as the stack of letters he had collected over the years could attest to. This particular letter had the seal of the White House at the top and the First Lady title engraved in the most soothing navy blue. He’d read the letter four, five times, allowing the dialogue and kind words to take on new timbres in his mind, picturing her sitting at her desk, tapping her pen to her lips as she thought out what she wanted to say to him. Her writing was small and elegant, no doubt modeled after Hannibal’s, and it was committed in blue ink, not a single smudge on the ivory linen.

She had plenty of questions for him and words of optimism that he’d gain more privileges soon. No mention of Graham, though—he’d been hoping to hear some sort of evaluation or fortune-telling about what his fate should have been. But he could always try again next month. Perhaps include a letter for him as well. He’d have to think about that some more, but for now he had her half of the conversation and he was eager to reply with his own.

“Be quiet! I’m trying to think!” he shouted shrilly at Miggs, who lived a few cells down from his, annoyed with the hideous moaning and vulgar rambling he seemed committed to at random times of the day.

He locked his eyes onto the photo and allowed his breathing to slow to something more restful,
serene; one of the therapies here was meditation and while he’d found it wearisome, he did find it took his own brilliant imagination to another level. He smiled and tilted his head to the side, clasping his hands neatly in his lap. Still not blinking, he allowed his mind to clear of all the outside clutter and waited…and waited…and then…

The photo came to life.

The hem of Abigail’s dress rustled in the breeze and he breathed in deeply the scent of a freshly mowed White House lawn. Hannibal shifted slightly, his eyes looking to the left to watch the crowds outside the gates of the White House.

“Oh don’t worry about them. They love you,” he scoffed.

Yes, the people outside of the gates were now waving American flags and signs that praised the new administration’s policies. A few people were screaming out for Abel’s attention as well and he gave them a wave to appease them. Oh, he really could have been a great politician if he hadn’t had such a bitch for a wife—he was a naturally charming man and that was what the public wanted. Slowly the Lecters stirred from their positions, sighing and relaxing.

Abigail’s polite smile turned into the beaming adoration she’d always given him as a child. “Hello, Uncle Abel.”

Abel walked across the lawn to them, his polished loafers sinking somewhat into soft earth, and his skin was covered in the expensive suit that would have been hanging in his closet this morning. Abigail was so young and lovely and Hannibal always had a good topic of conversation and oh, thank goodness he’d found them!

“First Lady, President Lecter, it’s so nice of you to come visit me,” he said appreciatively.

Hannibal’s eyes crinkled at the corner as he smiled. “Abel, tell me you haven’t eaten already.”

“I haven’t!” he lied, mouth watering at whatever delicacies Hannibal was going to prepare for him.

Abigail grabbed his left hand with both of hers—feeling just like ivory linen paper—as she led him towards the White House. “Come have brunch with us. There’s so much to talk about.”

Abel laughed and they joined in, Baltimore so many, many miles away…
Hannibal was in the middle of a conference call with his Secretary of Education and the corresponding cabinet when two things happened at once—the Marine stationed outside on the portico locked the door leading into his office and Agents Price and Katz entered without knocking. Something had happened and they were here to take him to a secure location.

As he waited for a break in the conversation, Will—whom was sitting beside him anticipated his desire to remain polite and took the responsibility to interrupt the woman speaking with a short, “The President will have to call you back,” effectively ending the call.

“President Lecter, if you’ll come with me, please. There’s been an incident.” Agent Price said as they both stood.

“What’s happened?”

Hannibal saw that the agents were going to try to separate him from Will and immediately his hand grasped Will’s upper arm tightly, locking him by his side as the agents led them from the room. He knew he was risking showing his cards early to Will and the people around them, but wasn’t that what made the game fun?

Price was scanning the Oval Office with very careful eyes. “Five minutes ago at the front gate, a man took a water bottle of gasoline and sprayed it onto two bystanders and then himself. Before anyone could react, he set the bystanders and himself on fire. We only have to do this because an accelerant was used. No one’s in any actual danger.”

“Do you believe it’s an isolated event?”

“Yes. It could be a diversion.” Katz walked in front of their small group, hands out and clearing a quick path to the basement staircase. “Front gate said witnesses claimed he was talking about angels before he attacked.”

“A psychotic break, then.”

“Most likely, but we can never be too careful.” Price’s hand worked at separating Hannibal from Will. “Mr President, he doesn’t have the clearance.”

Hannibal held on a second longer. “Will, I’ll see you soon.”

Will looked as though he didn’t want to leave, which was understandable. “Stay safe.”

As they were led away from one another, Hannibal frowned enough that he’d be recognised as ‘upset’ and not simply ‘making demands’. “I’d like Will’s status changed.”

“He’s not critical personnel,” Price stated, his hand against his elbow to direct him down the proper secured corridors within the basement.

“I do not care about that.”

They moved down the secondary staircase quickly, bunched together with Agents Zeller and Katz. “Well, in the time of an emergency, there are certain people we want near you and some people we don’t.”
"Why not Will? I trust him."

Price sounded amused they were having this argument. "I’m glad you do, but we need him to finish his medical treatment entirely, then we’ll reevaluate our position."

"In a time of crisis, he is someone I would like by my side." Hannibal wondered what Will would become in the state of absolute doomsday scenario. His heart skipped a proverbial beat at the thought of Will becoming him.

Price bumped against him slightly as they paused for retinal scans. "Well, I’m just going to have to tell you ‘no’ for now."

"I’m afraid I must insist, Agent Price."

"I like Will, too, but unless I get an ‘all-clear’ from his brain doctor, we’re not going to give you your Chief of Stuff. I’m in the business of keeping you safe, not happy. I can’t allow a man who had violent hallucinations, with the President in the bunker during a time of crisis. He really shouldn’t even be working here in the first place.” Hannibal could appreciate that Price was able to find humour in the situation and that he seemed comfortable around Hannibal enough that he could be less than formal—both traits that were very exploitable. "If a certain former surgeon hadn’t given him the okay, he wouldn’t be here."

"I care about his life. He is like me.” It seemed poetic to Hannibal that he felt such a keen separation from a man who was completely unaware of his intentions. "Have his status changed so that he’ll be with me next time."

*****

That evening before they were to go to bed, Hannibal sat beside his daughter in the former Dressing Room attached to his bedroom, hands folded neatly in his lap. Ornate but tasteful furniture had been assembled inside, many pieces that had been rescued from the White House’s storage spaces in the sub-basement of the Residence. Everything had been arranged to a single focal point on the east side of the room, a shrine that had been meticulously crafted by Lecter hands.

Lady Murasaki’s family clan swords were placed at the head of the altar, already polished for the day, the air cloying with clove oil. There was a picture of Mischa beneath them and the descending tiers included photos of John Kennedy, Aunt Jacqueline, his parents, and other various family members, though these final touches were added by his daughter. What had once been his altar alone was now a shared space for the two of them to be nostalgic, the only signs to an outside world that they acknowledged the people who placed them on a pedestal. There was even a small polaroid from 1981 of himself and Bedelia on The Honey Bee, his first boat. There were candles lit around Limoges boxes and lidded silver containers, all containing some part of their past they were proud off: Abigail’s fallen milk teeth, tickets to various performances attended, small bullet casings from various fall hunts.

There was also a larger lacquer box that had once belonged to his Uncle Robertas, a gift from Lady Murasaki; it had housed a rather ornate sake set, but now was used to hold Abigail’s report cards and small letters they had written to one another during a summer she had attended a summer camp with her friend. Hannibal found it amusing how pagan the shrine to their history looked and wondered how many of the few people who saw it simply thought it was a Lithuanian tradition.

Tonight he had placed a cheap plastic pen with the White House seal embossed on the side and a slightly chewed cap on the altar; his daughter turned to him curiously, wanting an explanation for Will’s inclusion to their shrine.
“Abigail, do you understand what you represent to him?”

She was quiet as she contemplated, and he was patient, wanting to see if she’d figure out, though he knew she didn’t have enough understanding of Will Graham to answer the question. She ended her silence by lighting a candle close to the photo of Uncle Ted. “No, I don’t.”

Hannibal watched her fan out the match. “To him, you are a living manifestation of all my ‘goodness’.” Her eyes returned to his, even more curious now. “Will has lived in a world where everyone he has ever worked for or with is completely corrupt. And he sees you as something that was once broken and is now whole. He cannot look at you and see me as a man like any other.”

She mulled this over and he took the box of matches from her hand, choosing to light a candle beside a photo of Cousin Patrick; the action was purely symbolic, that he recognised such behaviour actually did nothing.

Her hand found his. “Mischa’s excited to meet him.”

He turned to her, his smile full of teeth.

“I am eager for Mischa to meet him as well.”

*****

Saturday had the President abruptly pulled out of the Oval Office to the Situation Room, Jack muttering words such as ‘military uprising’, ‘Cairo’, and ‘tanks’. Will was left to take care of various tasks, all of it hideously boring, the last of which involved him going into the Vice President’s office. As he stood around in the crowded workplace, he studied the polar opposite dynamics of Du Maurier’s administration compared to Lecter’s; where the fellow staffers under Lecter’s watch were attempting an atmosphere of friends all working together, here there was an underlying competitive tension. Everyone in the room was young and fashionable, all giving sly smiles to the Vice President when they thought they weren’t being watched, placing themselves in submissive postures the closer she was to their proximity. It was young devotion, love to an authority figure, misplaced on a woman who was obviously more powerful with all of them beneath her thumb. Du Maurier pointed fingers and her staffers fell over themselves to retrieve whatever she needed, something that triggered an automatic response in Will to get into her mindset.

‘It’s quick and cheap to offer sex—they think it means I like them, that we have something special together. I can make them jump with a single word. I can sacrifice any one of them because there are always more willing to take their place. But they take care of me and I cultivate and maintain each relationship carefully—small gifts, private moments alone, a flirtatious look. They also think they have a level of power, a secret they could use as leverage against me at a later date. I like the ones smart enough to use it as a bargaining chip—they’re meant to be politicians and I can always use more that like me. The others will just remain in these service positions, satisfied because they don’t even see that they can have more if they want it—’

“Will, here’s the paperwork you asked for.” Alana interrupted his thoughts with a stack of manilla envelopes.

“Thanks.” He considered saying more, but the Vice President’s sudden staring made him uncomfortable and after nodding, he awkwardly left the room.

Before noon and before he could start debating having a lunch delivered from the White House’s kitchen (pros: he’d avoid being around anyone, cons: he’d feel like a pretentious asshole for ordering lunch when the kitchen was just downstairs) and walking to the kitchen to pick out something from
the buffet line (pros: he could stretch his legs, cons: he risked someone’s pity and subsequent invitation to sit with them while they ate), Will received a text from the President that there was a lunch waiting for him in the pantry fridge of the small dining room down the hall from his office.

Will felt hunger keenly as a boy and even now it was still a nagging presence, but he had learned to push it away so that he hardly ate anymore. But Hannibal Lecter’s cooking made it hard to ignore that instinct to feed and as he looked at the stack of glass containers that were labeled ‘Will’ with a dry erase marker, he could only be grateful that all the thinking had been done for him. The smallest container held a salad made of cantaloupe, figs, olives, and an herb that he suspected to be basil. Sliced baguette and a rich meat spread that had been labeled as ‘pâté de campagne’ were placed in the largest container; Will taste-tested the pâté with a finger and discovered that it had more finely chopped herb leaves and was delicately spiced. He’d had pâté before and while he had vague prejudices against the finely ground meat, it was still good tasting.

All the foods were best served chilled and Will wondered if this had been done because the President didn’t wish to inconvenience him with reheating or if he didn’t trust Will to reheat everything properly, which was a completely valid assumption. He smiled, toting the food back with him to his office and quickly spread out the array before him. As he had little understanding of wine, he decided to forego that element of the meal and stuck to the water bottle he’d brought from home. After retrieving a paper towel and a fork from the dining room’s pantry, he dug into the food, relishing the moment the range of flavours hit his tongue.

Halfway through the second piece of baguette, the door to his office opened and Alana leaned through the doorway.

“Sorry, didn’t realise you were eating.” She looked unsure, ready to leave.

“No, it’s okay. Please, sit down. Do you want any—” he waved his fork at the containers.

“No, I’m fine.” She sat across from him in one of the armchairs, then peered at the food on his desk. “Hannibal made that for you?”

“Left it in the fridge for me. Guess he’s worried I won’t feed myself if he doesn’t.” It wasn’t an unfair assumption.

Alana gave him an amused smile. “He’s good like that. Always thinking about others.”

“It’s easy to give someone food.” He felt guilt at how ungrateful he sounded and lest she report it back to Lecter, he added, “But appreciated.”

Will felt uncomfortable that she was watching him eat and he speared a piece of fig; before he came to work at the White House, he’d never even had a fig.

Alana passed the files she had been holding over to Will, taking the opportunity to say, “So, Hannibal seems happy you stayed.”

“I’ve not heard any complaints. Not that he’d ever complain.”

She smiled a bit broader. “Too polite.”

“I try to be a little more polite in his presence,” he admitted grudgingly.

“The infamous difficulties of Will Graham have been tempered by Hannibal Lecter?”

Will picked at the pâté, smearing it onto a baguette slice to be enough of a distraction that he didn’t
have to fake eye contact. “Another success to his administration, I suppose. He could list it after the Lectercare and Marriage Equality bills.”

Alana chuckled. “He’s too humble to take credit for your manners.”

“It’s not so bad being polite, though.” He glanced from the hollow of her neck up to her eyes and then back down to her lips. “Politeness has become so rare that people mistake it for flirtation.”

Her posture changed from relaxed to uncomfortable and she stood from the armchair. “I should get back.”

“Right.” He turned his attention back to his food. Why couldn’t he just settle for a friendship with her?

“Enjoy your lunch.”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the cantaloupe spheres in the salad.

*****

On Monday, Hannibal looked over Lounds' site, quietly contemplating the article she'd published about Mason Verger. Verger's face had been included at the top and he scrolled back up to look at it in curiosity. It hadn’t healed very well. Softly, he hummed the hymn he and Abigail enjoyed, a finger tapping against the frame of the iPad. If he focused, he could smell the warm iron of blood and the expensive powdery soap that Verger had so deeply enjoyed. He wondered if the paedophile still used it and the corner of his mouth twitched into the smallest suggestion of the smile. While he didn't keep active tabs on his only living victim, it was nice to catch up on old acquaintances.

And where Hannibal was involved, Jack wasn’t far behind.

“Did you see Freddie's article?” his chief of staff asked as they stood together in the cabinet room.

They were looking over talking points for the following day during the very public meeting between his administration and almost twenty governors, though excluding his successor, Tobias Budge. Immigration was to be the focus of the discussions, though this was a matter of formalities—Hannibal had no intentions of listening to complaints or even compliments as he had already made a decision months ago as to how he would proceed with the new bill that he’d have Bedelia get through push through Congress without too much resistance.

Will’s eyes were closed as he sat in the corner of the room, hand still poised over the Blackberry in his hand; he wasn’t asleep, nor did he appear to be resting, but Jack seemed to believe so and Hannibal was interested in watching his young assistant, so he said nothing to correct him.

"No. What has she been writing?" Hannibal asked, despite having read the article himself only an hour previous.

Jack’s voice dropped to a growl. “She’s going on about Mason Verger again.”

Hannibal was too polite to smirk. “No one takes that particular story seriously, Jack. It's nothing more than the monster under the bed. She's looking for new subscribers to her site.”

Jack looked back over his shoulder at the still silent man in the corner. “You know, Will got him elected.”

Hannibal never played stupid, but he could certainly play ignorant; ignoring the bait to gossip about
Will, Hannibal instead collected his iPad on the tabletop and reopened the Tattle-Politics homepage, feigning that he was seeing it for the first time.

“Yes, I see it’s merely a reprint of her oldest article. ‘Hannibal Lecter Did This To Me’,” Hannibal read aloud. “‘Former Governor Mason Verger Tells All’.”

“He got what he deserved,” Will declared loudly.

Hannibal and Jack turned around to look at the younger man, whose eyes were distant; then he seemed to shake out of his trance.

“Did I say that out loud?” he asked, his voice considerably quieter.

“You did.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

Jack shrugged. “It’s not like anyone would disagree.”

Sutcliffe appeared in the doorway. “Jack.”

Jack quickly excused himself. “I’ll be back in a second.”

Hannibal gave a nod, welcoming his time alone with Will; drawing back from the table to give the illusion of space, he pretended not to watch as the other man emerged from the corner to drift along the expansive table where files on each attendee had been set out. Will shied away from the iPad on the table which still boldly displayed Verger’s mutilated face. If Hannibal had his way, one day they’d be able to laugh about it.

“It would have been better if he’d just died,” Will muttered, staring in the direction of Hannibal’s tie.

Hannibal tilted his head to the side. “No. I much prefer him the way he is.”

“Just a delusional, drug-using paedophile.”

Will was trying to comfort him. It was a very considerate gesture. What a friend would do.

“Thank you for your confidence in me, Will,” he replied kindly, careful not to mock him.

Will put his glasses back on, a nervous tic that reaffirmed Hannibal’s belief that the other man had absolutely no grasp on how to feel himself as an equal to another. Hannibal hoped to change that.

Will attempted to sound flippant. “Well, the story sounds insane anyway. He was losing relevance in the public’s eye and what better way to gain it back than a bogus story about how ‘Governor Lecter’ talked him into mutilating himself?”

“He also said Abigail was there,” Hannibal reminded, wanting to give credit where credit was due.

“Disgusting.” Will’s voice was a guttural growl, obviously not having wanted to drag Abigail’s name into the matter. “Did the police ever question you about it?”

“No. His court appointed psychiatrist said that Mr Verger had an established fixation on me after I won governorship of Maryland. The police felt there wasn’t anything worth investigating.” Hannibal wondered how much guilt the other man bore over Mason getting into elected office. Will didn’t need to feel guilt—he was welcome to enjoy this triumph as much as him. “His outer self is still more attractive than the man inside, don’t you think?”
Will’s eyes slid to the still visible image of Verger’s mangled face on the iPad’s screen, then back up to Hannibal’s face, the edge of his lips starting to turn upwards. “That’s rude. But true.”

Jack reentered the room. “Hannibal, you've been asked to do a skit on SNL.”

“No.” It was difficult to keep the distaste out of his voice and he could feel Will bristling as well.

“It would be really good timing.”

“No. I did not appreciate their depiction of Abigail during the election.”

To his chagrin, his Chief of Staff addresses the matter flippantly. “No one liked it, Hannibal. We can request that she not be mentioned this time around.”

Hannibal had no interest in humouring them with his time. “No, Jack. I have no interest in appealing to them. They were never funny to begin with.”

Will actually smirked and Hannibal smiled, encouraging the young man to relax in his presence.

Jack made his displeasure known in his tone. “Fine, I'll get back to them.”

“They weren’t funny,” he caught Will murmuring and he coaxed a shared smile out of him as Jack called his office to cancel any appearances.

*****

Hannibal was indulging in drawing, a rough, abstract sketch of Will avoiding his eyes, his sharp pencil tip tracing one of the stray curly locks that always seemed to hang over Will’s forehead. It was early in the week and late in the evening; he was at his desk in the Residence’s living room and Abigail was reclined on the couch, attempting to look relaxed as she read a book, but he knew her well enough that she was really trying to find the right point in which to interrupt him. Her body language was becoming distracting and he asked,

“Do you need something, Abigail?”

He kept his eyes on his work and listened to her leave the couch and come around the side of the desk; Abigail looked over the sketch with interest. “We should make Will dinner for him to take home over the weekend. Comfort food. That way he’ll be thinking about us all weekend.”

What do you suggest?” he asked, creating a shadow along the temple.

“Something simple to reheat. Something that will taste good after sitting in the fridge. Enough for two lunches and two dinners, with extra because he looks like he needs to eat more. Something southern.”

She seemed to have placed a fair amount of thought into the matter and he glanced up at her, suspecting she had more up her sleeve. “Create a menu and bring it to me when you're decided.”

She had a very smug smile on her lips and she handed over a piece paper from her personal stationary. “I already have one.”

“Roast chicken, red beans and rice, and collard greens,” he read over, his mind already considering the fatback and hocks in the freezer that had been begging to be used. “For dessert?”

“We could have the kitchen make ice cream. Pecan vanilla.”
Hannibal wasn’t terribly excited to serve something that Will would simply pile messily on a plate, like slop for a pig, but the goal of this exercise wasn’t to impress—it was to in debt. “Excellent choice. Next time we shall make him something that is from our own recipe box.”

She nodded, looking proud of herself, then glanced back to the drawing. “You don’t usually draw men.”

“No.”

For a moment, Abigail’s expression became indecipherable. Finally she concluded, “It looks like him.”

“That was my intention,” he replied in a playful tone, but inside he was rapidly trying to translate the words she was hiding from him.

As she walked away, he glanced back down at the sketch of Will. Perhaps he should have drawn him looking him in the eyes.

*****

The desk of the First Lady was feminine and elegant, something left behind by the last First Lady, Cindy McCain; Chilton had never appointed anyone from his own life to take the place once he assumed the Oval Office and after an acceptable amount of mourning, had (probably) begged the widow to return to Washington to help him finish out his term. On Mrs McCain’s last day at the White House, she’d handed Abigail a very kind-worded letter meant to help her with her new role as First Lady—it had reeked of classism and patronisation over Abigail’s age. Abigail sneered—how hard was it to tell a fucking flower department that her father liked orchids in his flower arrangements? It was like a glorified house wife’s role. Abigail should be doing better things with her time, things that could help her father’s agenda.

As Abigail sat behind it in her very comfortable ergonomic chair, she watched her assistant Georgia talking with her personal secretary, Beth LeBeau. They seemed to be socialising and while Abigail wished to wield her power over them aggressively, it was a very slow day and she knew that people watching was the quickest way to spot weaknesses. Abigail was achy and hormonal, leaving her in a sour mood as she studied Georgia’s face; she was just a plain woman in a skirt suit, one who didn’t understand that Abigail didn’t like being touched by anyone but her immediate family.

“Something wrong, Abigail?” a gentle voice asked at her right.

She glanced up at her Chief of Staff and sat up, regaining control of her image not as a teenager slumped over at the desk, but as a First Lady who had actual distinct power in this White House.

“Hmm? No, just lost in thought.”

Mrs Madchen glanced over to her own daughter and said lowly, “You know, Georgia and Beth would love to have lunch with you. Might be nice to spend some time with girls around your age.” Abigail smiled politely, desperately trying to think of an excuse so she didn’t have to consider anything so boring. “They’re planning on going to a Katy Perry concert soon, actually. I know how much you like Katy Perry.” Abigail did not like Katy Perry—that was just something she said on the campaign trail to sound like the All American Girl. Uncle Jack had insisted on it. “If you want, I can pull some strings and get you in, too. They’d love for you to join them.”

“That would be fun. Why don’t you get me the date and time and I’ll check with Dad?” she replied sweetly, already planning on having her father schedule any kind of excuse for that day to get out of
“I’ll get right on it,” Mrs Madchen assured her, giving her a look that Abigail assumed was meant to be motherly.

Abigail didn’t need Madchen’s pity or her daughter’s friendship. As she turned her attention out the window to her left, she thought about Georgia’s allergy to shellfish.

*****

Bedelia watched her personal assistant’s foot bob, a habit that wasn’t annoying or distracting when it came to Alana; Bedelia sat behind her desk, Alana sitting up on the desktop—right leg crossed over the left—and while she loathed such casualness, Alana had fabulous legs and this was one of the few times she was close enough to touch them.

But she kept her hands to herself for now.

While she routinely enjoyed sex with various members of her staff, Alana was not one of them. In politics, sex could be used as a weapon and she wielded it with grace and care. The only person she could trust empirically was Alana, something she’d known within a week of the younger woman working for her. They’d been together for years now and to Bedelia’s knowledge, Alana had never displayed any romantic attraction to anyone; Bedelia found it both admirable and complicated. On one hand, it said she couldn’t be distracted by office relationships or other people of influence as many of her pages and assorted underlings had in years past. But it also meant that the usual reigns of power Bedelia used to dominate her subordinates couldn’t be used on her assistant, which left her balancing their relationship by emotional currency.

Bedelia brought a hand to rest gently on Alana’s foot to still her and before her assistant could apologise, she asked, “Tell me what you think of Mr Graham.”

Alana was so readable, her face running through a dozen emotions on both the embarrassed and wary spectrum. “Well, uh, he’s very good at what he does. An amazing analyst, seeing the big picture in ways no one else can.”

She was already very aware of this, but nodded as though it was a great insight. “And how do you feel about him working with Hannibal?”

Alana frowned slightly and the bridge of her nose wrinkled. “I’m um...a little surprised Hannibal wanted to work with him. I understand that Hannibal wants to work with people that are as smart as him, of course, but Will isn’t like other people. But they seem to be getting along now, which is good.” Bedelia nodded, removing her hand from the younger woman’s foot. “Why do ask? Are you...do you think he’s not right for the job?”

“You know how Hannibal is.” She was very aware that if Alana knew who Hannibal truly was, she’d already have him incarcerated.

“I thought Hannibal and Will didn’t exactly get along last year.”

“They didn’t,” Bedelia agreed.

Alana’s frown deepened. “Why would Hannibal want him to work for him then? It's not exactly a secret that Will doesn't like being around people.”

“He likes being around you.” Bedelia had seen the desire in the younger man’s eyes for her assistant.
Alana quickly looked back at her Blackberry. “It’s…something left over from when we were students. There was never anything between us.”

Bedelia wondered what Hannibal would do if she placed an obstacle between himself and his attempted conquest. “Do you wish to be involved with him?”

Alana shook her head, brows knit. “Will’s not meant to ever truly be comfortable with others in his life. That’s why it never became anything between us.”

Bedelia’s eyes narrowed. Something had definitely happened between them at some point and she speculated on what it had been. Maybe they’d had sex and Graham had wanted more, only for Alana to say—

“Bedelia?” Alana’s face betrayed that she wanted to ask something she worried would be hurtful. Bedelia loved those questions the most.

“Yes?”

“Do you miss Ben at times like this?”

Bedelia missed his predictability, his passion for her life, his cologne. She wasn’t lonely without him. She didn’t miss him.

She gave a sad smile to her assistant. “Very much. He would have been proud to see me in this office. He wanted me in the White House as much as I wanted him in the Supreme Court. I would have forced Hannibal to nominate him.”

Alana nodded sympathetically. “Hannibal would have nominated him anyway. I’m sorry he’s gone.”

“As am I.”

“But I’m glad you’re here.”

Bedelia glanced down at her assistant’s shapely legs. “I’m glad to be here, too.”

*****

Will had a rare two days off over the weekend and he had already committed himself to spending time with his dogs and working on a boat motor he’d bought of Craigslist for forty bucks. As he packed up his briefcase and righted his office, an usher whom Will didn’t recognise entered.

“Mr Graham?”

“Yes?”

A red cooler bag that bore a vinyl White House seal was handed over to him. “The President and First Lady asked me to make sure you received this before you went home for the weekend.”

“What…” Will unzipped the top and saw a casserole dish at the bottom with and cobalt glass container on top. “Is this food?”

The usher didn’t answer his rhetorical question and instead asked, “Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

“No. Thank you.” Will hoped his tone didn’t sound too flippant in his dismissal.
The usher smiled politely. “Have a good evening.”

Will nodded, zipping the cooler bag closed. “You, too.”

*****

That night when Will was hungry for dinner, he brought out the food he’d already investigated and placed in the fridge. Half a cooked chicken, red beans and rice, and collard greens that even cold looked like the most appetising thing he’d ever had in his kitchen. There had also been a container of ice cream which was in the freezer, wedged tightly between the ice maker and stacks of frozen tv dinners. A folded piece of the President’s personal stationary had accompanied the food and written in Lecter’s elegant handwriting were instructions on how to reheat the food. Will ignored the advice for preheating his hardly used and filthy oven and simply filled a plate of the food, shoving it all in the microwave on high for two minutes. The instructions were placed in one of the empty kitchen drawers however, as it seemed rude to just throw them away. Will couldn’t decide if it was sentiment or guilt that made him do this.

After helping himself to seconds, he watched the Secret Service agent outside driving slowly around the perimeter of his property. He’d only bought the fence posts and smooth wire last year to keep a few pesky campers off the back end of the lot. He wasn’t fond of fences as they disrupted the landscape, but this particular style was suited that it wouldn’t effect the local deer passing through and it wasn’t terribly visible from a distance. As he watched the red tail lights of the unmarked SUV disappear through a now well developed pathway in the tall weeds, he wondered how much taxpayer money it cost for all this protection on his behalf; he doubted that Clarice Starling’s killer was out to get him.

“I’m not sharing with you,” he said through a mouthful of rice and beans flecked with pieces of minced sausage to one of the dogs whining for a bite.

Tomorrow, he decided, he would have the ice cream for breakfast.

*****

Monday’s lunch was courtesy of Will, who’d brought the Lecters’ casserole dish back with stuffed bell peppers he’d baked himself. He’d been unsure how to return their hospitality and after spending most of Sunday morning worrying about the matter, he had taken it upon himself to cook something in return. He’d burnt the rice twice before successfully managing to get the peppers into the oven. Originally intended to be for the First Family to know about, Lecter had instead decided to serve them for lunch, which included Alana and the Vice President. Seated around the dining table, Lecter and Abigail brought everyone their plates and when Will’s was set in front of him, he hardly recognised what he’d cooked. Carefully arranged on the plate with some sort of relish, it looked like an actual refined meal.

“Oh, I love stuffed bell peppers,” Alana said as she placed her serviette in her lap.

Will gave her an awkward smile, imagining how he could segue this into an offer to cook dinner for her later in the week.

“Did you get this recipe off the back of a soup can?” Du Maurier asked as her fork picked at the filling. Everyone turned to look at him and his face burned in embarrassment. The Vice President gave him a prim smile. “It tastes the same as how my mother made them.”

“Campbell’s,” he mumbled.
“It’s delicious, Will,” the President said as he took his first bite.

Abigail nodded encouragingly. “It really is.”

Will’s appetite disappeared over the evaluation of his cooking, and he mindlessly pushed the food around on his plate. He was aware of Lecter watching him, but was of course far too polite to say anything about it. Eventually he feigned a phone call on his Blackberry and took his lunch back with him to his office, sitting alone as his food grew cold and his finger grew tired of cleaning out his email’s inbox.

*****

“Barney, I would like to ask a favour of you,” Hannibal told his daughter’s agent after lunch. He’d walked her back to the East Wing and felt the timing to talk to Agent Matthews to be ideal.

“Sure, Mr President. What can I do?”

“Abigail and I have been feeling restless lately.” Barney chuckled and nodded as though he could understand what they meant. “She and I would like the opportunity to explore the city anonymously. We would like your assistance.”

At this, Matthews’ face lost its humour. “Now Mr President, I can’t allow you to go out alone.”

“I understand. We thought that perhaps you could act as our escort. She and I could disguise ourselves,” he added pleasantly.

As Hannibal had predicted, the agent seemed willing to bend the rules. “Let me…let me check. I think I could make it happen.”

“Thank you, Barney. Abigail will be very happy.”

*****

That evening when he and Will were finishing a discussion of his schedule for the following day, Agent Matthews let himself into the Oval Office.

“You may speak in front of Will,” Hannibal instructed when he saw the agent look at Will apprehensively.

Matthews nodded. “It’s short notice, but would tonight work for you, Mr President?”

Hannibal was glad he hadn’t planned anything for the night. “Yes.”

“Eleven o’clock?”

“That would be perfect. Thank you, Barney.”

Matthews smiled. “I’ll meet you in the Treaty Room.”

“We shall be there.”

Matthews nodded and left, muttering into the microphone on his wrist, no doubt talking to other agents about the plans for the night.

“You’re sneaking out,” Will said hesitantly, his lips curling into a smile.
Hannibal nodded. “Yes.”

Will said nothing more, his attention still on the letters he was sorting through. Hannibal was happy this was his assistant’s response and mused how long it would take for Will to join he and Abigail out.

“Supposed to be cold tonight,” Will commented casually as he packed his briefcase for the evening.

He nodded. “I’ll make sure to put on an extra layer.”

Will’s eyes met his for a moment and then lowered again, the small smile still on his lips. “Have a good night.”

*****

As it was still only mid-April, the night air was still chilly in Washington, but not unbearable. For their night time excursion, Hannibal and Abigail had dressed the part. Abigail had tucked her long hair beneath her watch cap, rendering her androgynous; he had on a baseball cap (Yankees, taken from the lost and found) and a baggy hooded sweatshirt (also from the lost and found). The costumes were unsophisticated for two reasons: firstly, Hannibal didn’t particularly want the Secret Service to know how adept he and his daughter were at disguising themselves, and secondly, it was only necessary to deflect casual glances—no need for anything elaborate. Hannibal did not like the tracking anklet he was wearing—it was a small steel cable looped around his ankle tightly, pressing the small tracker box tightly to his skin. He was aware that the moment the cable was cut or otherwise disconnected if would immediately alert the Secret Service that something had happened to him.

The White House had an extensive tunnel network leading to various edges of the city; designed as escape routes, the majority of the tunnels weren’t used and the ones that were merely found their usage relegated to transporting things to and from 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Tonight they were being used for something far more exciting. For being such a large man, Agent Matthews managed to move as stealthily as the Lecters; upon meeting them in the Treaty Room, he showed them one of the escape passages in the White House that led them down to the sub-basement, which connected to the tunnel system.

“I’ve timed this so that we won’t run into anyone. This is as low key as I could make it, Dr Lecter,” Matthews assure him.

“How many people know?” Hannibal asked, hoping Matthews would be as discreet as he believed him to be.

“Five in total. Two in the watch station, one at the end zone, one at the midpoint, and me.”

That was an acceptable number in Hannibal’s mind. Matthews motioned for them to wait in one of the recesses and then approached an agent standing in front of an ordinary door.

“Mike, need you to take a five minute break.”

“But—“

“Five minute break.”

The agent nodded hesitantly. “Five minutes.”

Once they were alone, Matthews unlocked the door with a passcode, revealing the door to be
armoured and under magnetic lock, and motioned for them. “Okay, come on.”

Now in a tunnel that oddly smelt of sawdust and salt water, they were lead quickly through various locked doors every fifty yards, each lock clicking from red to green within feet of their presence. Hannibal assumed this in part due to the agents manning the security cameras, but said nothing. As they continued for another fifteen minutes, he memorised the layout of the tunnels, covertly noting where the cameras and motion sensors were angled and filing the information away for later; he would quiz Abigail later to make sure she had done the same.

Eventually they emerged at Rawlins Park out of a man hole hidden in the hydrangea bushes that was guarded by a plain clothes agent. Abigail’s hand found his and with Agent Matthews not far behind, they began to walk around the sidewalk bordering the block.

“I’ve missed this. I’ve missed going wild,” Abigail murmured to him.

“We are hardly going wild,” he teased.

She squeezed his hand and he shifted his ankle uncomfortably against the tracking anklet. His daughter wore one as well and he noticed her gait was changed slightly to accommodate the wire band against her skin. To anyone else, they looked like nothing more than two people on a late night stroll, but this was merely the precursor to a hunt. They were mapping out the terrain, looking for dark corners and vulnerable doors—this was their new environment after all and if opportunity ever struck, they would be ready.

They happened along one of the busier streets and he whispered, “Pick one.”

Abigail’s eyes locked onto a man busy trying to sort the keys to his car. “Him. He backed into our car and tried to give us money instead of allowing us to call our insurance company and the police. He’s had multiple accidents and his premiums will skyrocket.”

“But he tries to deflect the blame from himself at the last minute rather that just accept responsibility,” Hannibal added, his hand tightening around Abigail’s.

“What parts?” she asked, relying on him to determine what they could take.

He inhaled deeply, pretending he could smell the man from here, though in reality he was simply reading visual cues to learn more about their pretend mark. “He’s a smoker, but believes that by running he will offset any chance of illness, an incorrect assumption as he smokes nearly a pack a day. We shall take tenderloins. Hindquarters for bresaola…”

She looked the man over. “Ribs to be slow cooked; it looks like he has just enough fat to make the meat very succulent.”

“A very good observation.” He brought them both to a halt, allowing their agent to reach them. “Agent Matthews, we will be going for a jog back to the park now.”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

Hannibal took the opportunity to be regretful that Matthews would never want to participate with them in their true state; it would be interesting to see what a man like him could be capable of. As he and Abigail began to jog at a respectful pace so that it didn’t seem like they were trying to outrun their detail, she turned to him.

“Thank you.”
Abigail was hosting an event in the State Dining Room where she was to read children’s books to a local class of first graders visiting the White House. She was dressed casually, looking very much like a babysitter that any parent would feel comfortable leaving their child with. It was such a wonderful disguise in many ways, showing Abigail as the paradox she was supposed to represent—youthful daughter and lady of the house. Naturally he could see through the layers of her persona and latched onto her discomfort of being around squirming six year olds, unable to relate to them. She’d never truly been part of that world.

“I hate children,” Bedelia murmured at his side as they watched her from a doorway, her lips fixed in a pleased smile so that no one would suspect she was saying something so unpopular.

“No one forced you here, Bedelia,” he reminded her patiently; in fact, he was fairly certain she was supposed to be preparing for a meeting with the Japanese ambassador at noon.

“I had to come. She’s taken Aunt Jackie’s place here and I want to see.” Of course, ever obsessed with the Kennedy legacy.

“Abigail is not our Aunt Jacqueline, Bedelia.” No, Abigail was so much better.

“She could be.” Bedelia’s tone softened, whether by her effort or not, Hannibal was uncertain. “I see that potential in her.”

He offered his arm out to her, ignoring her wishes to mould Abigail for her own fantasy. “Shall we?”

She smiled and slipped her hand into crook of his elbow. Together they entered the room quietly, stepping around the edges of the occupants. The adults in the room immediately registered their presence, standing straighter and eyes reverent, perhaps a bit intimidated; the children gave appraising glances but seemed overall unaware as to who they were. Hannibal led Bedelia to the back of the room to stand in front of the empty fireplace, mirroring where Abigail sat. Abigail’s eyes met his briefly and he gave her a small smile, just enough to encourage her; memories of her ballet and concert recitals as a child blossomed in his mind and he tucked this moment away along with them. This was one of her performances to show the world around them that she was First Lady, a costume meant to display the virtues all First Lady’s were to possess: Compassion, Grace, and Demure Intelligence.

Upon moving into the White House in 1800, John Adams had written a letter to his wife Abigail that said, “I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this House, and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof.” Franklin Roosevelt had had the quote engraved in marble mantle place and Bedelia’s fingers touched over the words, exchanging an amused look with him—blessings were always welcome in his house. His daughter’s voice rang through the room as she dramatically emphasised words in the book about a little frog and he carried the sound to his memory palace, tucking it safely in Mischa’s nursery so that she’d have someone to read her a story whenever he came to visit.

Bedelia finally reached her limit of interest and left the room silently, leaving a void at his side that was soon replaced by Jack, who covered his mouth as he spoke quietly. “There’s been an incident at the Boston Marathon. They think its a bombing. Five minutes while I round everyone up. I’ll have Zeller get you.”

“Thank you, Jack.”
Abigail’s eyes were locked on their interaction and as his Chief of Staff left the room, her smile was a shade less friendly. After finishing the book, she motioned for Miss Madchen to pass around the copies that were to be given to the children, then excused herself politely before hurrying to his side.

“Is everything okay?” she asked quietly in Lithuanian, keeping her expression pleasant so as not to alert anyone in the room that something was amiss.

He smiled and straightened the scarf around her neck. “There’s been a bombing at the Boston marathon.”

“Do we have to go to the bunker?”

“No, though we are on high alert. Just continue your work and I shall see you at lunchtime, if I am permitted.”

Her smile began to lose its shape. “Are you going to the Situation Room?”

She seemed to dread the hours he spent in there—he supposed she didn’t like him thinking about tragedy.

“Most likely.”

“I love you,” she said quickly, her voice laced with worry.

“I love you, too.”

“Text me if you need anything.” It was an offer she always made when he was taken away, so naïf in the assumption that she could solve any problem if he simply asked her to, that her love for him could bring any answer he needed.

“Of course,” he replied, touching her shoulder gently.

“Mr President.” The youngest agent on his detail stood behind Abigail, his eyes flicking down to the top of her head.

“Thank you, Agent Zeller.”

Zeller and Abigail nodded to one another politely; Hannibal allowed himself to be lead away and thought about how close the agent had become to his daughter. That might pose a problem at a later date, though it was certainly something exploitable in the meantime; Zeller’s mind would lose rational the closer an issue became about Abigail. He wondered how far he could push that. Will joined them outside the room, handing over various printouts still hot from the copier and notified him of almost a dozen personal calls he’d received that morning so far. One of the few luxuries of having an assistant was that Hannibal no longer had to find the patience to deal with small talk on the phone—Will was a perfect buffer between himself and that part of the human world he had never particularly cared for. Socialising with family or associates had such a tedious nature, consuming more of his attention and time than he was willing to give. And this way he simply looked very busy running the country, an amusing thought as this was a job in which he didn’t have to hide his actions from the public. Where was the difficulty in that?

As he was ushered into the Situation Room, he spared one last glance at Will, giving him a reassuring smile. Will gave him a grimace, eyes filled with anxiety and as the door closed between them, he wondered what the young man would analyse of the information his intelligence officers were about to deliver to him. He itched to bring Will back to the room, but instead watched the gathered footage of an explosion, of blood and screaming confused civilians standing by the finish
line of the marathon. He bit back a sigh and began to compose a speech to the nation as he pushed away the sounds of his childhood back into the darkest recesses of his memory palace.

*****

“Will, you shall be coming with us to Bedelia’s property this weekend.”

It was Tuesday, the day after the bombing at the Boston Marathon and Will was barricading himself from the frantic and pacing personalities that were roaming the White House in need of answers. The President seemed to be handling the matter as he did with everything else—calm grace and overall patience, though Will could tell just from the way the man’s shoulders shifted that he was deep in thought about the matter; Will huffed softly at the thought he was starting to know Lecter well enough that he could read his body language.

“I’ll inform Jessie that I’ll need her to stay over then,” Will mumbled to himself as pulled out his Blackberry to text the woman he had started to rely on far too much for his own personal comfort.

“How are your dogs, Will?”

“Well, they still recognise me.’ “They’re fine.”

“Any new additions to the pack?”

“No, not recently.” He waggled the Blackberry at the President. “Been a bit busy.”

Lecter’s lips twitched slightly. “We’ll be spending the time for leisure.”

‘He probably needs it. It must be horrible to think about Boston—he’s had first hand experience with explosions and massive war trauma and terrorism on his watch.’ Will nodded shortly. “Noted. I shall pretend it’s a paid vacation,” he tried to joke, hoping to lighten the mood, though he certainly didn’t feel better saying it.

Will thought of a stack of books he’d been neglecting in the living room and decided he’d bring one or two along. Once excused from the Oval Office, Will swallowed two aspirin dry, then chased it with some of the orange juice he’d poured into a water bottle he’d borrowed from the First Family’s kitchen. There were two white noise machines in his office and he was able to find peace in the the absolute quiet of the room as he sorted though the day’s assignments, letting time pass where his mind had nothing to focus on but work.

The President’s cellphone was averaging six calls an hour since the bombing, which was a huge turn considering he usually averaged about six a day. Will was carefully writing down a message from the President’s cousin Maria in California (”I know you’re not supposed to talk about him, William, but does he seem okay? I always worry that these kind of situations bother him. Tell him to call me back this evening when he gets the time—I don’t care how late. And can you tell Abigail I said hello?”) as his office door opened and in walked Abigail, a vaguely guilty look on her face. She took a seat in one of the arm chairs and stared at him until he had to avert his eyes to the memo pad he was writing on. The call concluded less than a minute later and he looked at her expectantly.

“Can I hide in your office?” she asked.

His brow knotted. “Hide from who?”

She looked down at her Blackberry which was buzzing, then set it down on a file cabinet. “Georgia.”
“Why do you want to hide from Georgia?” he asked, suddenly hoping he wasn’t conspiring in something accidentally.

“She wants me to join her for lunch.”

“You don’t want to spend time with her?”

“She and I don’t have a lot in common,” the teenage said with a shrug.

“Oh.” Will lowered his voice a fraction. “I think she’s nice.”

“I didn’t say she wasn’t nice—I just don’t have much to talk about her with.”

Will could agree to that. She was probably stir crazy in the White House without anyone her age to associate with and having someone force friendship was something he could completely empathise with. He looked back down at the memo pad.

“That was your…that was Maria Shriver on the phone. She wanted me to tell you ‘hello’.”

“I’ll have to talk to her when Dad calls her back tonight. What was she calling about? Checking up on Dad?” she asked and he nodded. “I think she’s been bothering Aunt Bee about it. Are the others calling you a lot, too?”

“A whole slew of Kennedys on the line,” he joked, then looked quickly to the mail that had been delivered to his office fifteen minutes previous. “I have a new Newsweek if you want to look at it.”

She shook her head and he withdrew the magazine. “What are you up to?”

“Your dad wants me to look over letters protesting the Keystone Pipeline.” He motioned to a folder thick with various letters that had already been selected by lower level assistants.

“May I look at them?” she asked, though didn’t wait for an answer and began to pull some from the unread stack. “Is he really going to stop the building?” When he said nothing, she added, “I know how to keep a secret.”

“He says he’s going to.”

“Do you think he should?”

“Yes.” He shrugged. “But I’m a biased.”

“You’re an environmentalist,” she stated.

“Comes with being a fisher.”

She tilted her head slightly as she stared at him again. “Hunters care about their prey’s environment.”

“Where is your aunt’s property?” he asked curiously as he discarded another letter into the ‘passive-aggressive-this-won’t-be-handed-to-the-president’ pile.

“Boring.”

Will lowered his eyes, rolling his shoulders inwards defensively as he returned his attention back to the file; he had no idea why she’d suddenly cop an attitude with him, except that she was a teenager —
Will looked up from the files, frowning. “Boring, Maryland the town?”

“Yes, that Boring.”

Relief flooded through Will and he smiled as she stifled a giggle.

“You didn’t think I was being rude, did you?”

“Slightly worried.” He glanced down at the Blackberry on his desk which buzzed for the incoming message. “Your dad needs me in the Cabinet room.”

“See you,” she sang, making no move to leave his office.

He paused and then pulled a small dish of candy off his desk, offering it out to her. She plucked a few peanut M&Ms out and smiled at him; he smiled back and returned the dish back to its place, shutting the office door behind him as he went to see what the President wanted.

*****

Boring House.

Will acknowledged the sign flatly as they drove through the parted iron gates in the President’s motorcade. Rich people named their properties stupid things all the time, but this one was possibly the worst. At least it wasn’t ‘Boring Kennedy House’. The property was a sprawling one thousand, nine hundred and forty acres, a little over three square miles; surrounded by dense woods and just north of the small town of Boring, Maryland, the private road winding and narrow. It was Friday evening and the pursuit of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was underway; the entirety of Boston and neighboring Watertown were shut down as thousands of law enforcement officers—police, FBI, Secret Service, National Guard—engaged in a grid search over the last known location of the wanted young man. They’d left for Maryland quietly, so as not to distract the media from the coverage of the case, Press Secretary Crawford stating simply that the President had full faith in the FBI’s handling of the investigation and he would be kept abreast of any developments.

In reality, it still felt like an unnecessary vacation for the upper echelon members of the White House. Will sat beside Lecter in the back of the Cadillac One, the massive armoured limo that was used to transport the President everywhere; in the three rear facing seats opposite them were Agent Price, Abigail, and Vice President Du Maurier. The trip to Boring had been quiet and uneventful, everyone pretending not to listen to Lecter’s phone calls to the defense agents briefing him on whatever law enforcement was accomplishing.

“This is where my Aunt Bee grew up,” Abigail told Will, a happy smile on her lips indicating that she was fond of the place.

The Vice President’s eyes darted over to look at his face and he very carefully pretended he didn’t see. He had the very distinct impression she didn’t like him; he had no idea why and wondered with a sick feeling if perhaps Alana had told her something.

Lecter turned to him. “While our bags are being taken to the house, perhaps Abigail and I can show you around the property, Will.”

“Okay,” he mumbled.

Du Maurier’s eyes left his face and returned to their gaze out the window. The forest opened up to reveal a very large house that looked almost geometric, brown stone spires and large panes of glass. It was an incredible sight to behold, a fortress that looked alien amidst the otherwise untouched
landscape. Will couldn’t help but lean forward to look around Lecter when he spotted a dark surfaced lake that had a small boat house on the side closest to the house. He’d always wanted a private fishing spot on his property and while he was grateful to live beside a state park that had various creeks and streams, a lake like this would be a dream come true. As the pulled into the large circular driveway and awaited the Secret Service to allow them out of the car, Du Maurier spoke again.

“Hannibal, would you mind showing your guest to his room? I’m afraid I need to make sure the house staff have made the proper dinner arrangements for tonight.”

Will glared at door handle. ‘Yeah, I don’t exactly want to be here either.’

“Of course.”

The door opened and Lecter exited first, followed by the Vice President, then Abigail. Will followed after them, happy to stretch his legs; the car ride hadn’t been that long, but it had been tense regardless. Jack, Bella Crawford, and Alana appeared out of the other cars in the motorcade while neatly dressed staff swarmed out of the house to begin collecting luggage that had been brought along, some carrying trays with drinks on them. Will felt very out of place among everyone and he drew himself back against the Cadillac as he watched the world around him; taking a few deep breaths, he went to the President, hoping to excuse himself to the privacy of the guest room he’d be staying at.

Jack was talking to the President and upon his presence at Lecter’s side, the Chief of Staff handed Will a classified briefing that had been tucked under his elbow; Will accepted it without second thought as Jack finished up his conversation.

“Very well, Jack.” The President turned to him as Abigail linked her arm through her father’s. “Would you like to see the lake, Will?”

He actually did. “Sure.”

The lawn sloped downwards from the house and as they walked along the stone path, a large second story deck came into view. Will could hear activity on the deck though he couldn’t see anything from this angle. Where the lawn sloped to the lake, it was now apparent that part of it was held back by a retaining wall that curved towards the boat house. The wall rose high enough to form a safety barrier between the drop to the lakeside and the lawn, three feet off the ground.

“What’s it called?” Will asked, looking across the still surface of the lake.

Lecter turned towards the water. “I don’t believe it was ever formally named. My Aunt Athalia often referred to it as ‘the swamp’.”

Abigail chuckled as she climbed up onto the retaining wall and began to walk along the top. “The water level will get a little higher once the weather gets warmer.”

“The end of the snow melt.” Will agreed.

“It’s too cold to swim in. Sometimes we take the little row boat out, though.”

Bullet points ricocheted through Will’s head, words and phrases filling his thoughts like fiberglass in lungs until he was able to see the pattern they formed. ‘She was on her school’s rowing team, the former coxswain, then later captain. This is where she discovered her love of being on the water.’

“Not exactly a racing shell,” he said, hoping that he didn’t sound as though he was trying to start an
“Close enough to work the same muscles,” she agreed. “And—ooh!” she let out a shriek as one of the stones slipped out of the wall and she lost her balance, falling into the thick, young cattails below.

Will rushed over to the edge of the wall, reaching his hand down to her. “Are you okay?”

She made a face and held up a muddy hand. “Ugh, it’s wet down here.”

Will was more than surprised when Hannibal leaned over the edge and in a very West Virginian accent asked, “Hey, Baby. Hey, Baby. Did you fall down?”

“Hey, Baby. Hey, Baby. Did you fall down?” Abigail sang back as she reached for Will and her father’s hands to get back over the wall.

“Are you okay?” Will repeated softly, as she sat on the edge of the wall.

“I’m okay. Just dirty.” She wrinkled her nose as she brushed the wet earth away from her boots.

The President righted her mussed hair, carefully plucking small organic fibers off her sweater; he was exhibiting absolutely no concern that Abigail could have hurt herself and Will found himself scowling, anger rising in him. Or maybe he was overreacting? Lecter smiled over at him and Will turned his head to look at the cattails.

“All better. Though we shouldn’t play on the wall until the groundskeeper reinforces it,” the President said taking Abigail’s hand in his.

“Probably water getting in between the mortar and freezing,” Will muttered as he looked at space the rock had inhabited.

“I’ll have to change,” Abigail mused, tapping her boots against the wall to get the last of the mud off.

“Everything okay, First Lady?” Agent Matthews called out as he walked quickly towards them.

“I just fell, that’s all—“ she replied, but a second voice from the front of the house cut her off.

It was Jack, running towards them with a cellphone held aloft in his hand. “Hannibal! They got him! They got him!”

Will watched as the President’s jaw clenched slightly, no doubt annoyed that Jack couldn’t announce the news in private. There were cheers and applause from various people and Abigail gave a muttered, “Thank god.”

“If you will both excuse me.” Lecter didn’t wait for a reply as he stalked over to his Chief of Staff.

Abigail watched curiously and Will had the sudden urge to mimic the President and straighten out the stray lock on hair that wasn’t lying flat, but she turned to him before he consider it seriously. “We should probably go inside anyway. It’s getting dark out.”

*****

After an impromptu address to the nation, filmed in Bedelia’s library whilst the weekend’s guests were shown to their rooms, Hannibal made his way to the kitchen, hungry and wishing for something meditative, like reheating food. Outside on the deck, a barbecue grill had been set up and Sutcliffe and Agent Price were busy cooking for everyone. Not interested in half burnt, highly processed junk meats that was dripping with grease, Hannibal went to the refrigerator to retrieve the
food he’d had an usher pack for the trip. Spotted though the high glass walls that looked into the kitchen, Will walked in from the deck, eyes half hidden behind the frames of his glasses.

“Do you want me to grab you a plate?” He gestured over his shoulder to the deck.

Hannibal removed the neatly packaged food and set it on the counter. “I’ve brought my own dinner tonight, thank you.”

“Not a fan of hamburgers, I take it.” Will’s tone was light and he pushed his glasses up just enough so that they were no longer entirely blocking his eyes.

That was an understatement. “No.”

“Looks good.” There always seemed to be a longing in Will’s voice when it came to food and Hannibal didn’t have it in himself to say no.

“There’s enough for two. It will take only a moment to reheat.”

“Oh.” Will looked uncomfortable, but yes, there was some desperation in his voice to eat what Hannibal was offering rather than anything at the grill. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Join me.”

There was a hint of a smile and the younger man nodded. “I’d like that.”

It took a little more than five minutes to reheat the food in the pan and he had Will retrieve plates and set the small table in the corner of the room. Hannibal had originally hoped to share the food with Abigail, but this was a rare opportunity to have only Will’s company. From his view at the stove, he could see Abigail had managed to scavenge a hamburger and a paper plate that held crudites most likely purchased from the local market. Abigail—despite all his best efforts—still enjoyed eating the food of the common man; he had no idea how she could get it in her mouth without becoming terribly ill.

He plated the food, Will hovering nearby. “Roast lamb on a bed of wilted kale, served with caramelised squash and onions.”

Will plucked a cube of squash off the plate that was supposed to be Hannibal’s and popped it in his mouth. “It’s good.”

“Let us sit down,” Hannibal requested. Will stole another bite from the plate and Hannibal chuckled quietly, carrying their plates to the table, the younger man shadowing him closely.

“It’s good,” he repeated, taking large bites and hardly chewing.

Hannibal found himself sated merely watching the other man eat. “I’m glad you think so.”

“I’m sorry I’m scavenging from your dinner.”

He watched Will’s mouth accept another forkful of very chatty lamb. “No, you aren’t.”

“I am,” Will insisted; Hannibal was still deciding if he liked how rushed Will was while eating. He appreciated Will’s hunger, but why look like an animal when once could look like a man?

“And yet you keep eating.”

“Maybe I’m not as sorry as I should be,” the other man admitted, a hint of colour in his cheeks that
went well with the humour in his voice.

Hannibal smiled and set his fork—still untouched—back down on the table. “Let me get something for us to drink.” He stood from the table and went over to the stove. Hannibal was in the mood for cinnamon water, no doubt a desire triggered by his arrival to Boring House as the drink was something made by his late Uncle Joseph rather often. “I’m afraid my cousin hasn’t allowed me into her reserves this evening, so perhaps we can indulge in something nonalcoholic for now.”

“Oh, I’m okay with just water.” Will looked embarrassed as Hannibal found Bedelia’s kettle and a bottle of cinnamon sticks on the spice rack.

“Nonsense. Perhaps I can make you something else as well?” he inquired, suddenly not satisfied with the mere leftovers he’d decided to serve Will.

“You really don’t…” The younger man trailed off,

“It’s no trouble at all, Will.” Hannibal felt inspired to perform. “Something simple then?”

“Please, don’t. You’re already sharing your dinner. I can…I can just grab a hot dog or hamburger outside.” Hannibal couldn’t mask his distaste quickly enough and the young man laughed. “Does that offend you, Dr Lecter?”

“The smell of that processed meat is atrocious—heightened senses or otherwise. Why not enjoy the last of the free range butchering?” He removed a neatly wrapped bag from the freezer of sliced kidney that had been marinated in a rich garlic and lemon sauce. While he preferred preparing meat as fresh as possible, this was the only way to work around the constraints of having a security detail and thankfully, Bedelia was willing to accommodate his need for storage.

As he carried the bag to the kitchen counter, Will gave one last protest. “Are you going to at least make some of it for yourself? Your own dinner is getting cold.”

It was true that his food was cooling and while that might otherwise make him uncomfortable, his dinner for the night had specifically been brought because it would reheat easily. “Perhaps a bite,” Hannibal admitted, curious how this particular dentist’s organs tasted. “You weren’t fed much as a child.”

“No. Nothing really good, anyway.” Will was all but licking his plate clean.

“Hunger is one of the primal urges. It’s good to have. Hunger teaches you to survive.”

Bedelia’s kitchen had an induction stove which made for incredibly fast cooking; he brought a pot of water to a boil in minutes and dropped the bag in to rapidly defrost its contents as he moved about from cupboard to refrigerator, retrieving various food items and utensils as he set about to prepare the spontaneous meal.

Will asked to assist, undoubtably experiencing guilt for feeling hungry, but Hannibal insisted once more that it was of no difficulty to him; in fact, he was enjoying the act of cooking for the younger man more than he would another guest, a realisation that was curious but understandable. Will seemed to move through cycles of self doubt and self confidence, waxing and waning like the moon; Hannibal had yet to pin down the particulars of that patten, mostly relying on small minutia in the other man’s body language and speech. Sometimes scent was a help, too, but that was usually a rare instance to do so undetected. And now he was allowed to perform while Will was in a mood quite malleable to friendship.

He allowed the kettle to cool as he blanched small carrots to accompany the kidney slices, and was
soon able to braise the meat to tender perfection as well, the kitchen filling with heavenly aromas; he pretended not to hear Will’s stomach growl in protest at the wait for the extra meal. Finally, he plated the food and brought it to the other man, who did not point out that he’d plated none for himself; it seemed that all Will’s manners had left him in his hunger and Hannibal tucked that piece of information away with humour.

Sitting back down across from Will, he watched as he took the first bite. Will closed his eyes, savouring the food and Hannibal wet his lips without thinking; it wasn’t what Will appreciated, but that he did appreciate. It wasn’t important that Will wasn’t going to give elaborate praise for the food, but that he’d never be ungrateful. Someone perpetually hungry, just like him.

Suddenly aware that eyes were on him, he spotted his cousin watching him through the glass doors leading to the deck. She was standing by Jack, feigning listening as her eyes moved between him and Will before her lips curled into an unusually pleasant smile and he looked away, instead taking a bite of the lukewarm roast on his plate.

*****

Will’s stomach was full from the dinner he’d shared with the President; he’d declined a beer from Beverly, knowing it would be too much on his stomach and settled with iced tea from the kitchen. The guests dining outside had begun to group off in their own social circles, for the most part ignoring Will, which was fine by him. The deck was more of a massive viewing platform, overlooking the entire property; stationed around the edges in even spacing were potted trees and various patio furniture that looked as though it were worth more than his station wagon. Large heaters had been set up on the deck, casting everything in a warm glow and taking the chill off the air; he was looking for a quiet spot to retreat to, enjoying the chance to stay outside when he spotted Abigail sitting on one of the benches around a low table, her head turned to look out at the lake. Will considered leaving her alone, wondering if she needed space, too, but felt the spidery tendrils of loneliness and was willing to venture that she might enjoy some company.

“I was wondering where you had drifted off to. Everything all right?”

She sat up slightly, but her smile was warm. “I just wanted some quiet. I can only be around people for so long before I burn out.”

She pointed to the bench across from her and Will sat down. “Me, too.”

“You lasted longer than me,” she pointed out.

Will glanced out to where Lecter stood, talking with Du Maurier and Mrs Crawford. “I would have thought you would be with your dad.”

“No, he’s busy being magnetic.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Magnetic?”

She glanced back to the socialisation on the deck. “He’s giving everyone what they want and right now that’s a very friendly President who’s going to assure them that they can go to sleep without a single care. That the Free World is indeed safe.” She raised her glass of iced tea in a toast to her dad’s direction, then straightened their glasses neatly on the table between them.

He looked down at the way she organised and he was reminded distinctly of how the President was constantly adjusting everything in his office. “Because that’s what your dad likes.”

“Order,” she agreed as she nudged her glass a few more millimeters to her right.
“I’ll have to add that skill to my list of duties. ‘Control freak’,” Will joked.

“My dad’s not a control freak. He’s a perfectionist. There’s a difference.” The smile began to fade and she looked down into her drink. “Garrett Jacob Hobbs was a control freak.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me, you know. I don’t want to be a voyeur into your life,” he told her quickly.

“Because you could see it if you wanted to.” The ice cubes in her glass clanked around. “What was your dad like?”

“Um, very quiet man.”

Her eyes appraised him. “Like you.”

“Yes.” But he was quick to clarify. “Though his was nature. Mine is more by necessity.”

“Were you close?”

“Sorta. He was a single parent. Tried to take care of me the best he could. We didn’t have a lot in common.”

“He…passed away, didn’t he?” she asked delicately.

“Back in ’97.”

Her eyes looked at the sky, doing a quick calculation. “You would have been twenty-two then.”

“Right.” He shrugged, thankful he didn’t have a beer in his hand after all. “He drank. Not a mean drunk, just a sad one.”

“That must have been hard.”

“It was.”

“Where was your mom?” she asked, concern on her face.

Will clenched his glass of tea hard, trying to act as calmly as he could. He wanted to scratch the knot out of his throat, not wanting her to see the weakness. “She left us before my first birthday. Uh, didn’t really like kids from what I understand. The last time I heard anything about her was back in 2000. She was living in Texas.”

Will looked up and saw Abigail’s eyes were on the glasses between them. “I remember bits and pieces of my mom. She...was very...meek. She loved me, but she was afraid of Hobbs. We both were. When she made my lunch for school, she would squeeze the mustard out into a smiley face on the bread before she made the sandwiches. She liked country music, I think. I have a memory of her playing it in our van, though it might just be a dream.” Abigail’s shoulders rolled in something that bore semblance to a shrug—not indifference, but as if something was attempting to creep under her skin. “I don't miss her. A little, I guess. Mostly just the nostalgia of her. The thought of having a mom.

“He killed her in front of me. Some kids made a prank call to our house that morning while we were in the kitchen making breakfast; they told him they were the FBI and he thought it was real. He just...he just snapped. Remained totally calm, though. Just left us in the kitchen and came back in with his hunting knife. I didn't even notice him until my mom fell to the floor.” She swallowed hard.
There was…blood everywhere. All over the front of her shirt. It was a green shirt,” she added, her brows knotting momentarily. “I just sat there on the floor and stared at her. He…” Abigail paused, her eyes completely distant and Will had no desire to fill in the blanks. Whatever she’d seen, whatever she’d heard would destroy him. “Afterwards he put me in the front seat of the station wagon and we drove around the city for hours.”

Will couldn’t help but ask the question that had always nagged at him. “Why did he go to the clinic that night?”

Abigail looked up at him finally and he found it impossible to break the contact. “I don’t know. I’ve wondered ‘why’ for years. If he was hoping that they would be able to save me. If he wanted them to cut us up and use our organs for transplants. If maybe he just wanted to do it somewhere where they could clean it up afterwards, where they were used to blood.”

Will’s hands took hers between his own, wanting to provide her fingers with comfort and warmth. “He was remorseful. He didn’t want to kill you. He had no other choice. Loved you the only way he knew how.”

She looked down at his hands. They were quiet and he was thankful that she hadn’t pulled away, but relaxed into his hold. “Someone once told me I bring out the worst in others.”

“No, don’t ever think that. Look at your Dad. Look at how happy you make him. How could you think that?” Will gently ran his thumb over her knuckles. “Do you know what Hannibal Lecter’s defining moment was in his life?” Abigail looked at him again. “You. You changed the course of his entire life. When I…taught about your dad at GWU, I would always…I never wanted to state it explicitly, but if you hadn’t come into his life, he would never have gotten into politics. I’m sure he was happy with his profession as a doctor, but you were the butterfly that created the tornado.” She raised an eyebrow and he quickly explained, not wanting to sound like a complete psychotic. “Philip Merilees once asked ‘Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?’ While a butterfly has no power to directly create a tornado, the thought that the smallest flap from its wings could create small changes in the atmosphere that lead to a chain of events creating a tornado is not unbelievable.”

She nodded. “The Butterfly Effect.”

“Right.”

The tension in her face eased. “This is why he likes you.”

Will pulled his hands away. “He thinks he knows me. But he doesn't. My mind is…grotesque, but useful to him.”

She shrugged. “You think of horrible things. Your mind goes to dark places and you're scared of what will follow you back. There’s a reason I felt comfortable telling you about who I was. You don’t need to be saved. You need to be seen.”

Will’s throat clenched and he searched her face for any sign of humour or malice, but found none. No, she believed everything she was saying and it suddenly made the words hurt even more. If she had any idea of the places his mind could go…

Lecter appeared at the edge of their seating arrangement, his eyes moving between Will and his daughter; when he spoke, his tone was light as it tended to become around Abigail. “I was beginning to think the two of you had abandoned me here.
“We’re just talking,” Abigail explained, smiling at him reverently.

Will quickly stood up and offered, “I can leave you two alone.”

“We would rather have your company, Will.” The President motioned for him to sit again, but he didn’t.

“I’m not very good company,” Will said, not as a self-depreciatory statement but as an absolute fact.

Lecter’s lips tilted upwards slightly, that odd smile he made anytime he thought Will was being irrational. “After Abigail, your company is my favourite.”

Will turned his eyes back to the house, feeling the rising panic of knowing he was getting close to disappointing someone, which was surprising in itself. What did he care about disappointing Hannibal Lecter. “I’m going to get more iced tea. Would you like some, Abigail?”

She handed her glass over. “Please.”

He couldn’t return to the house quickly enough, needing the space to breathe. He refilled their glasses from the pitcher on the counter, waving off the hired kitchen staff who were trying to clean around him. When he returned out to the desk, carefully avoiding anyone who might try to talk to him, the Lecter’s were murmuring to one another in what he could only assume to be Lithuanian.

“Here you are.” He held the glass out carefully to her and she plucked it from his grasp.

“Thank you, Will.”

Will sat down, pulled back in the seat to create a level of distance between himself and the First Family. He didn’t care what they thought they saw in him—they were fucking wrong. He was just disappointment on top of complexes on top of encephalitis, dust creating shadows in the air around everything. The three looked out across the property, eventide graced the property with the last of the sun. Everything else seemed a world away, even with the deep band of purple beneath the black night sky; Will could see the stars twinkling in the frozen heavens and he picked out simple constellations he’d been taught as a child, wondering if Abigail had ever been taught about the stars.

They settled into a comfortable silence—Will did not feel as though he was merely being tolerated, but welcome because of what he wasn’t contributing. ‘When I have nothing to say, my lips are sealed,’ Will thought to himself, though careful not to allow the chorus of ‘psycho killer, qu’est-ce que c’est’ to run on a loud loop in his mind. It was nice to sit among company that didn’t need him to perform for their sake. And it wasn’t a matter of class, but an understanding that constant blathering like the other people here at Boring House wanted to engage in. Will drank his iced tea and looked at the father and daughter with his peripheral vision; Abigail had settled against Lecter and he had an arm over the back of the bench, a subconscious and possessive indication of family.

“When I was growing up in New York City,” Lecter finally said as the last of the purple sky disappeared, “my Uncle Robertas would take Lady Murasaki and I out on evening drives around the city and teach us the history of the buildings. I believe he was trying to distract us from any thoughts that he was the last Lecter son, I was the last Lecter child, and Lady Murasaki was the last of her clan.”

Abigail gave a comfortable hum of agreement, and Will’s own inclusion felt small.

“I am the last Graham.”

It was a weak and unimpressive statement to make; the Grahams would not be remembered as
anything more than a footnote for the 2012 Democratic campaign committee, while the Lecters would be in history books until the skies went dark. The President’s eyes met his, dark and impervious to any of Will’s empathy.

“We are unique. There are none like the three of us.”

Will’s eyes left the President’s and met Abigail’s instead, her voice echoing in his head, ‘he’s magnetic’. It was true. Somehow Hannibal Lecter had managed to bring the three of them together.

The President shifted on the bench and withdrew his arm from around his daughter. “Well, if you will both excuse me, I believe I shall turn in early for the night.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Will asked, the faint curl of concern in his stomach.

“A slight headache.”

“I have aspirin if you want some,” he offered.

Lecter stood from the bench. “I believe there is a bottle in my bag. Thank you, Will.”

“Goodnight, Dad,” Abigail said, her hand still holding his for a moment. The President leaned down to kiss her cheek, murmuring something in a foreign language into her ear.

Will scrambled to his feet and without knowing what else to do, he held out his hand to be shook. “Goodnight, President Lecter.”

Ever the gentleman, the President shook his hand. “Goodnight, Will.”

*****

Abigail was acting as her father’s gatekeeper for the night, roaming the hallway and staircase that led to their rooms. She wasn’t allowing herself to become bored, instead wandering through the wonderful dreamworld her father had helped her build within her mind; tonight she was exploring an attic of her childhood, playing with old dolls while her father poured tea for their social and she was wearing a teal dress that they’d burned one night after a play date with a man who had dogs.

There were footsteps and her hunter’s instincts kicked in. She looked up from her tea cup and announced, “Would you please excuse me? I think someone’s here.”

Her father primly dabbed at his mouth, pouring more tea into her cup. “Of course, Abigail. I shall tend to the Odalisque.

The nude Barbie doll sitting in the chair adjacent to them turned her head to Abigail, blank eyes requesting that she be called by her proper name.

“Princess,” Abigail corrected distantly before she walked out the attic door, shutting it carefully and locking it behind her.

Her eyes left their haze and she found herself sitting at the bottom of the stairs, a book opened to a random page that made it look as though she was reading. The man who appeared around the corner was none other than her father’s Deputy Chief of Staff and her former physician.

“Hi, Dr Sutcliffe,” she said sweetly, looking up at him from behind her dark lashes.

He stopped before her, looking surprised to see her there. “Oh, hello, Abigail.”
“Busy?” she asked, looking to the files in his hand.

“I have to go talk to your dad—“

“About what?” she asked curiously, standing up so he couldn’t get around her.

“Classified.”

She had no idea how she was going to keep him from getting anywhere near her father’s empty room, but she was excited to see what would happen. “Well, he went to bed early.”

“Oh, I wondered why I couldn’t reach him by phone.” He took a step forward but she didn’t move. “I really need to get these to him.”

“I can take them up. My room’s connected to his and I can just slip them in.”

“I really need to talk to him actually.” He took another step forward.

She shook her head, pleased with how close he’d brought himself to her. “He’s probably sleeping by now.”

They were quiet and she looked down at his lips.

“Are you…” He looked unsure.

“Flirting?” She smiled.

“Are you?” When she made no effort to deny, he gave a nervous laugh. “Your dad would kill me.”

She acted scandalised. “Can you imagine him killing anyone?”

Sutcliffe laughed again.

“Abigail…” He looked behind his shoulder. “Where’s your detail?”

“At the hotel for the night.” She raised an eyebrow. “Which is really where you should be, right?”

“I really need to get these to him,” he insisted.

“Is it a matter of life and death?” She pretended to be worried.

“No.”

She shrugged. “I promise I’ll get them to him and tell him to talk to you first thing in the morning, okay? He’s not going to talk to you tonight.”

“You’re making it hard to say no,” he murmured as her fingers began to straighten the pin on his lapel.

“So don’t say no, doctor.”

She leaned in, anticipating his effort to pull away and brought her mouth to the side of his neck, sucking and nipping along the space of his jugular vein. He shuddered under her touch and she brought a hand to his chest dragging it across the small buttons of his shirt. Of all the people in the White House, she could just devour him alive, pouring his screams with hot butter and sinking her teeth into warm, giving meat. His breathing gave a shudder and she pulled away, licking her lips.
“You promise you can get these to him right away?” he asked, fidgeting as though he wanted to loosen his tie.

“Absolutely. You can count on me,” she said with absolute sincerity.

“I should leave.” His voice was thicker than it usually was.

Her own was casual, dismissing. “Well, I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

“Goodnight.”

She was very aware she’d just painted a large target on his back and she couldn’t help but be amused. “Goodnight.”

It took her ten minutes to completely relax, to finish enjoying the taste of Sutcliffe’s skin. She entered her mind palace once more, locking the figure of Dr Sutcliffe in her torture garden, where he’d be free to roam through the manicured hedges; she hoped she’d find him later tied up and twisted into the rose bushes. Climbing up winding staircases, she returned to the attic where the tea social was waiting for her return. She sat back down at the table, noting that the petit fours were really just cubes of meat that had been covered in white icing. The Princess looked to Abigail.

“Who was it?”

“Dr Sutcliffe.”

The Princess Barbie nodded, her turban slipping slightly.

“What are your plans for him?” she asked, mouth unmoving.

“I don’t know yet.” Abigail frowned, before turning back to her father, smiling. “I bet we could have a lot of fun unraveling him.”

Her father chuckled. “Drink your tea, Abigail.”

*****

In his late uncle’s library was a section devoted to the outdoors, all old Audubon books and guides from the late eighties that seemed picked at random from a bookstore’s hunting shelves; Hannibal located a book on fly fishing in North America and brought it back to his room for reading. He was curious what Will found so fascinating about it, wondering if that sort of discipline could be channeled into other uses.

It was early Sunday evening and he had excused himself from the absolutely atrocious company the remaining guests were keeping; Bedelia’s guests were young and while cultured, they were also piggish in many ways. It had driven Will off as well as Abigail and while he might have humoured himself with Alana’s familiar company, she had been busy coordinating a last minute flight to Canada for Bedelia to be present at an ambassador’s wedding in lieu of himself. So he was now sitting on his bed with his back against the headboard, reading about the history of fly fishing.

There was a knock on the wall behind his bed and he smiled, knocking back in return. Lowering the book to his lap, he turned towards his closet and after a moment, the door to his opened and out stepped his daughter.

“Hello, Miss Lecter. Out for a walk?” he asked, smiling at her fondly.
“Yes, I am, Dr Lecter. Would you like to join me?” She held out a hand to lure him to her.

“I’m afraid I can’t. I have work I must attend to.”

“Would you like me to bring you back a souvenir from my trip?”

“If it wouldn’t burden you.”

“I’ll trying to find something tasty,” she teased.

“Stay quiet,” he warned her and she saluted him.

“I will.”

Over an hour later, he set down his book on the bed, pages still open to mark his place; while he enjoyed the silence and solitude—a luxury that was almost nonexistent since becoming President—he found that he had a hard time being away from Abigail. He’d spent almost her whole life closely monitoring her every movement and when he couldn’t know what she was doing, he found himself very frustrated. ‘Perhaps it is simply how all fathers are,’ he speculated as he left the bed. He considered for a moment where she would most likely have wandered off to and after a few quick calculations as to where she enjoyed frequenting and where she was least likely to get caught, he settled on the den in the basement.

He opened the closet door and pressed on the left side of the wall to open the passage way. Shutting the closet door, he entered the passage and closed it behind him. The passages in the house were narrow but usable. Only Uncle Joseph, Aunt Athalia, and Bedelia had been aware of their existence, which meant Bedelia had shared the secret with him the moment he stepped foot into the household at the age of nine. His late uncle had been worried about communists or some such nonsense and when he had the house built back in the early 1950s, he’d built the estate to be a fortress, ready for any foreign or domestic attackers that might wish to strike him.

In reality, it had simply become the method through which he and Bedelia had spent many Easter vacations sneaking of the property to enjoy late evenings in Baltimore, later his only way to evade the ever watchful eyes of the Secret Service. To their credit, they had never met a man like him before, so it was understandable that they were unaware of what exactly he was capable of. He had spent hours as a child memorising the layout of the passages, perhaps better than the Kennedys themselves. Now only he, his cousin, and his daughter knew of them, each planning on taking that secret to the grave.

Behind the kitchens was a subtle exit disguised in the side of a fireplace and because it was a favourite exit, Bedelia maintained the cleanliness of the fireplace; he wouldn’t track soot onto the carpet and give away his presence, but would sidestep the few people milling around the house. He didn’t want to talk to anyone except his daughter, because she wouldn’t fill the silence in his world with needless words.

As he rounded the hallway that held the staircase to the den below, he paused. Something was off. Another person—dirt, cheap cigarettes, old sweat. He descended the stairs, wondering who the other person was, sniffing the air as the odour of a strange body grew stronger. It wasn’t offensive, but definitely not belonging to anyone who’d accompanied them to Boring.

He could smell blood and a mixture of sweat and adrenaline. Fear. It was not Abigail’s and he could hear footsteps walking that didn’t belong to his daughter either. Quickly calculating, he slipped off his shoes and set them down beside the wall, evaluating the situation as best as he could with the limited information he had. The footsteps belonged to Alana, the high iron tang belonged to someone
else. Coming up silently behind Alana, who was walking towards the den, he grabbed her by the head and with calculated force, slammed her skull into the wall, then caught her body and carefully laid her out on the floor, smoothing her hair out. He retrieved his shoes, slipped them back onto his feet and continued the rest of the way the den where his daughter was kneeling over the body of a young man he didn’t recognise.

“Abigail.” Her head jerked over to him and he saw her hands were covered in blood. “What happened?”

As he knelt beside her to evaluate the body, she seemed to be in shock. “He…he…”

She tried to reach out for him, but he grabbed her by wrists to keep her from transferring the blood onto him. He could offer her comfort later.

“She tried to—I don’t know how he got in here. I was playing in the passage ways and I came out here because I wanted to sneak out to the boats and I walked in on him. He began talking really fast—saying that my dad killed his father and I said I didn’t know what he was talking about and he said that my dad killed his dad and I was really confused and I realised he wasn’t talking about you, but about…him.” She glanced back down at the knife handle sticking out of the young man’s chest. “I found it in the passageway. I was pretending I was you.”

“I would never have gotten caught,” he said tightly, unable to keep himself from insulting her.

His lips formed a thin line; he’d dropped the knife the night before and hadn’t been able to retrace his steps to find it. He began to search through the man’s pockets, looking for weapons and finding none, pulled out a thin nylon wallet in the man’s jacket pocket. Twenty-three dollars, a few convenience store receipts, family photos that included one of a man that was no doubt his late father.

“He wasn’t armed,” Hannibal commented as he looked at a driver’s license. Nicholas Boyles. The son of Doug Boyles, Hobbs’ sixth victim.

“I didn’t know,” she whispered hoarsely.

He looked up at her, his jaw set in a stern line. “I will get rid of young Mr Boyles. Go clean yourself up now.” He added, “Alana is unconscious in the hall. Be mindful of her.”

He inflected just enough disappointment into his tone for her to lower her eyes in shame for failing him. Bedelia’s house was no place to kill someone, especially with so many variables in play—Secret Service agents, White House employees, Will. She could have been caught and while he was confident he could have it covered up for a price, it wasn’t a path he particularly wished to explore. The scent of the young man’s blood was heavy in his nostrils; he touched the man’s abdomen beneath his shirt and pulling the large hunting knife out of the stilled ribcage. While he’d been out hunting the night before, there was nothing wrong with taking a little extra. Light smoker, lean, convenience store coffee…he looked up to the small fridge hidden in the wet bar.

And meat wasn’t supposed to go to waste.

*****

Will wandered down the hallway from his room, lost in thought as he went to find the windbreaker he’d set down somewhere in the house and had been subsequently moved by someone else. As
someone who rarely socialised in others’ homes, Boring House was something of a daunting anomaly to him; on one hand, he didn’t like being in territory both unfamiliar and belonging to a person who was essentially a stranger to him. But at the same time, there was so much space to move about in that he could isolate himself rather easily. He’d spent a better portion of the morning walking around the lake, hypothesising where the ideal fishing locations were, even if he’d never get a chance to fish there. Then he’d had a solitary lunch out on the deck overlooking the property, before turning down a game of chess with Beverly. The evening was relatively quiet as well and Will felt guilty that yet again he was spending little time with his dogs at home, wondering if he was completely defeating the purpose of rescuing them. ‘They’ll forgive you,’ he thought to himself, though there was a hint of desperation to the thought.

Something on the cream coloured carpet of the hallway caught his eye and he paused before picking up the small object. It was a tiny lapel pin he’d grown very familiar with—an American flag that belonged on Lecter’s suit. Cupping it in his palm, he walked down to the hallway to the President’s bedroom to return it to its rightful owner. He knew Lecter had retired to his room early for a second night in a row, stating his desire to read. Will had wondered if perhaps the President was simply exhausted from the week’s nonstop attention to the bombing at the Boston Marathon.

At the door to the bedroom—not monitored by an agent, no doubt dismissed under the President’s orders—Will brought his knuckles softly to the hard wood. “Mr President?” He waited a moment and then knocked again. “President Lecter? Are you busy?” Still no answer. “It’s me, Will Graham. I-I found your flag pin in the hallway. Can I come in?” He leaned closer to the door, hoping to hear any indication that he was welcome to enter, but there was nothing more than further silence. He took a deep breath and opened the door, hoping that he wasn’t going to walk in on anything that could embarrass either of them. “President Lecter?”

The room was empty and a quick glance towards the shared bathroom which was dark, so Lecter truly wasn’t there. Will frowned, absolutely sure that he hadn’t heard the President walking down the staircase to the main floor as the sound carried to his own room at the end of the hall. There was a book on the bed and curious, Will glanced at the title. ‘North American Fly Fishing’. He wasn’t aware that a small smile had crossed his lips and he thought about the tying guide he’d brought along with him; perhaps the President would want to look at that, too? He frowned slightly, turning to exit the room. If he caught Lecter in the house’s impressive library, which he’d been given permission to use, he could spring the idea on him without it sounding too strange.

Down the stairs and to the library…which was empty. From there he drifted though the quiet house, looking for Lecter until he reached the kitchen.

“If you seen the President?” he asked Beverly, whom was refilling her thermos of coffee. He knew she had about an hour left on her shift at the house before she’d return to the hotel rooms offsite in Boring.

Beverly looked back over her shoulder, nodding her head towards a descending staircase. “Uh, try the library room.”

Will had a sudden anxiety that he was acting like a babysitter and quickly thanked her before leaving; he couldn’t imagine how annoying it was to have people constantly hovering around him at all hours of the day, thinking they were helpful. It seemed so overbearing. Perhaps the President had snuck off to catch some fresh air. No, agents wouldn’t want him to be outside at night. He closed his eyes, venturing tentatively into Lecter’s shoes. ‘I want to be alone. I…’ No, he mustn’t let it get out of control. The golden pendulum swung once and Hannibal Lecter stood in front of him before turning away and walking towards the back of the house. Will followed after the imagined Lecter; while he’d been told that no part of the house was off limits, he’d still been hesitant to explore,
certain he would violate some sort of boundaries. The back of the house was quiet—not a single agent anywhere and Will found the staircase that would take him into the lower level of the house, that looked nothing like a basement, but an extension of the home. He watched Lecter descend the staircase quietly and Will smiled, remembering mention of a wine cellar and den. Perhaps if the President was willing, they could enjoy a glass of something and sit together in comfortable silence like they did the night before.

The imagined Lecter that stood on the staircase paused, looking right at him before continuing and Will hurried after him, pushing the President’s mind out of his own, tucking the pendulum back. The lower floor of the house seemed to have the most personal air to it, the serenity of a sanctuary; on the walls were neatly arranged photographs, all of them Kennedy kin, though heavily themes of the Vice President and with Lecter couldn’t be overlooked. While it was no secret that the two politicians were very close, the photos made it seem keener now. *She favours him. After herself, he’s the only one who matters.* With only a six month age difference, it would be natural that they’d become close. Captivated with this new facet of the cousins he was seeing, he slowed himself to study the pictures.

A young Bedelia on her wedding day, standing on the steps of a cathedral with the late Judge Benjamin Singh Du Maurier to her right and an equally impressive Hannibal Lecter to her left. Will was willing to admit that both had aged remarkably well, growing into a level of elegance that seemed to belong only to old Hollywood.

Next was Bedelia and Lecter at what could only be his graduation from John Hopkins; Lecter was in his early twenties, his smile relaxed and a bit smug and her hand gripped her cousin’s arm almost possessively; Will tucked that piece of information away, deciding to study its importance later.

After that was a photograph that seemed much more candid; Abigail looked to be about ten and she had her arms thrown around the President. They were wearing sweaters and were standing in the snow, ice skates over their shoulders. Will recognised the lake behind them—frozen over and scratched from thin blades—to be the very same body of water on the property; he wondered if they often came up to ice skate or if it had perhaps been her first time, if they even skated anymore—

“Will?”

Will turned to the sound of Abigail’s voice, not immediately registering that it was in fact very frightened.

“Hey, Abi—oh my god, are you okay?”

Her hands were covered in blood and her face was very pale.

“I—I—“

He grabbed her firmly by the shoulders. “In through the nose, out through the mouth.” Once her breathing became more stable, he asked, “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“There was this man—“

His body felt coiled to turn and run back upstairs to the agents. “I’m calling Beverley—“

“No!” she begged, grabbing the front of his shirt with her red hands. “Please. Daddy’s…taking care of the problem.”

Will covered her hands with his. The blood was tacky and drying in flakes on her skin. “Abigail, is the man still alive?”
She shook her head. “No.”

“What happened?” he asked quietly.

“I thought he was going to hurt me. Daddy told me to go wash my hands.”

He touched her cheek gently. “Where is he? Your father?”

“Down the hall.” Before she stepped into the bathroom, she added, “Watch out for Alana.”

“Hannibal, what—“ He stopped to look at the body of Alana crumpled on the floor by the doorway. “What happened to Alana?”

Lecter was in the process of hoisting the body of a man onto a Persian rug that bore a few palm-size blood spots on it. “This man attacked her and Abigail.”

Will found himself longing for his aspirin. “We need to call Secret Service.”

“We need to dispose of the body, Will.”

The President said it so calmly, Will wasn’t even sure if he heard it right at first. “What?”

“There will be an investigation and Abigail will be at the centre of it. It doesn’t matter if it was self defense or an accident—people will remember what Garrett Jacob Hobbs did and they will brand her as a killer. Do you want that, Will?”

Will found himself shaking his head, because of course he didn’t want that. “No.”

“Then help me,” the President said simply.

He turned to look at the body of his fellow aide lying on the floor. “What about Alana?”

“She will be fine. I checked her first.”

It was no longer surreal but very, very real now and Will raked his hands through his hair. “Shit!”

“It’s all right. This will all be fine.”

He pointed to the now rolled up rug. “There is a dead body—“

The President grabbed him by the shoulders, albeit gently. “You are my partner in crime, are you not?”

Will blanched, remembering how lightheartedly he had said those words. “I didn’t mean it literally.”

“Too late for that.” Was that a smirk? “This is for Abigail.”

The President pushed a blank space of wood panel between bookcases and there was a small click before the section of wall swung inwards, revealing a dark passageway. Will stared in disbelief at the tunnel which had small lights strung on one side every few yards. It looked like something one would see on the border for transporting drugs and the air was dank.

“What…”

The President had grabbed one end of the rolled up rug and instructed Will firmly, “Take his feet, Will. We need to move quickly.”
Will lifted the end closest to him and after he walked through the secret doorway, he used a foot to kick the door shut behind him. “You know, the Secret Service is going to know something happened when Alana wakes up. They’ll know someone was in the house and attacked her.”

“Yes, but they won’t find him.”

Will had dreamt of hiding bodies more often than he was comfortable to admit, but to actually be doing it was creating a very confusing sensory feedback loop in his thoughts, his brain unsure if he was imagining he was someone else to cope or if it was really him. Regardless, he found it entirely disturbing how natural it felt to be disposing of someone.

“Where are we going?”

“To the boat house.”

Will struggled to hold the rug up as the weight of body wasn’t balanced and kept causing the centre of the rug to sag. “Isn’t there an agent out there?”

“He’s patrolling the perimeter of the lake with another agent in shifts; it won’t be hard to slip inside between their passes by the boat house.”

It struck him that perhaps he should have been the one to dispose of the body while the President stayed behind to look after his daughter—the man was a doctor, after all. “Was Abigail hurt? She looked really scared.”

“The blood wasn’t hers, though I don’t know what this man did during his altercation with her.”

“Oh god…this isn’t good. This isn’t healthy for her…”

“She was able to defend herself.”

“Why didn’t she just use her panic button?” He hiked the rug up higher against his chest, trying to maintain a good grip on it.

“And wait? This was a blitz attack—she had no guarantee that an agent would arrive in time. She did the right thing.”

“She can’t be alone after this. Ever. She needs someone with her at all times from now on.” Will said, surprisingly firm. He wasn’t going to let Hannibal argue with him on this. “If he’d hurt her—he came here armed, she’s lucky she didn’t get killed.”

“I agree.” To the left was a rising set of steps cut into the tunnel wall, leading up to a trapdoor. “Remain here. I’ll dispose of the body.” The President hoisted the body up the steps with Will’s help.

“What are you going…” He felt sick and turned his back to Lecter, not wanting to have any details in his mind of what was to happen to the man’s corpse; the trap door shut behind the President and Will looked down at his hands.

The President was gone for seven minutes—the longest stretch of time Will had ever experienced—and as he stood alone in the earthen tunnel, he imagined himself cutting up the body into very small pieces and boring holes into the walls, tucking each piece of flesh and bone away like small larvae in a bee hive. When Lecter returned, straightening his suit, Will hoped his thoughts weren’t visible on his face.
“Did you sink it?” Will asked hoarsely, his throat suddenly very dry. Dehumanising the body seemed to only way to keep himself from thinking about it having been a breathing person less than fifteen minutes ago.

“Yes.”

“You know that you have to puncture the lungs and stomach so that the body doesn’t inflate from postmortem gases?” Will felt something inside him break. He shouldn’t know about these things. He shouldn’t have practical application for them.

“Yes, I was aware.” Lecter nodded his head back towards the direction they’d came. “We should go check on Alana. She’ll awaken soon, if she hasn’t already.”

Their pace was quick through the tunnel. “What…what do we tell the agents when they ask where we were? If Alana’s already awake and they’re looking for us?”

“We were out for a walk.”

Will looked at Lecter skeptically. “A walk? They aren’t going to believe that.”

“Yes, they will. Never make your lies more than half truths. You and I are out for a walk right now, are we not?”

“And you just happened to sneak out from under their nose?”

“Abigail and I do it regularly. It makes them very mad.”

“Okay. Okay, we’re out for a walk,” Will repeated, forcing himself to accept that as a truth. “How many passages are there on this property?”

“Dozens. My Uncle Joseph created this property as a labyrinth.” He looked back at Will. “And no, the Secret Service is completely unaware of any of them. But we must be careful entering into the house again. We don’t want to alert them that we’re lurking in the walls and floorboards without their knowledge.”

“Could that man have gotten in here through one?”

“I do not believe so.” The President looked contemplative. “The cellar door on the north side of the house has always been a weak spot.”

Lecter paused and peered through a small crevice in the end of the tunnel, no doubt a small surveillance point between the wood paneling.

“All clear?” Will whispered.

“Just Abigail.”

The wall swung open and they stepped out, Lecter closing the passage behind him.

Abigail looked between the two of them frantically. “Is…”

The President stepped over to his daughter and took out his handkerchief, wiping away a stray tear. “We have helped you, Abigail. At great risk to our careers and our lives.”

Will could smell her damp hands and the hand soap that she’d used to wash the blood—
“What did you do with him?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“He’s at the bottom of the lake house now and the knife is in the mini bar,” the President stated.

“You didn’t get rid of it?!” Will hissed at Lecter, suddenly furious that they’d just sunk a body in a lake but not the murder weapon itself.

“I…I can wipe it down for blood,” Abigail offered, moving over to the fridge.

“No, give it to me. You shouldn’t be found with it at all.” He started to walk over, but the President caught him by the arm, giving a single shake of his head.

“You should not put your prints anywhere in this room, Will.”

Will was shaking and glaring at the President; how the fuck could he be so stupid? The last thing that needed to be found was the weapon itself. Abigail paused, staring into the small minibar fridge, then retrieved a large hunting knife, bringing it back over to them. The President held out his handkerchief, allowing the knife to be placed and wrapped in the lavender silk. Will’s anger drained into a primal fear at the sight of the knife being placed into his hands. The blade was huge and serrated, tacky with chilled and drying blood—he looked up to Abigail’s pale face, horrified that some piece of shit motherfucker had come here with this knife to use on her—

“I’ll get rid of it. I’ll get rid of it,” he soothed as he tucked the wrapped knife into the back of his pants waistband. “Don’t worry. I’ll make everything better. Don’t cry, I’ll make it better.”

Abigail stared down at the bare floor, looking unsure; her father recaptured her attention as there was a soft human noise out in the hallway.

“Alana is waking. You need to start screaming for help. When the Secret Service gets here, tell them that you saw a man attack Alana and you ran and hid in the bathroom. Describe Mr Nicolas, as there is no doubt evidence of him here. Tell them you saw nothing, that you were scared. You’ll do fine.” He held out a hand. “Give me your panic button.” Obediently, she retrieved the small black device from her pocket and placed it in his palm. “When the agent asks where it is, say that you accidentally left it upstairs with me.”

“I will.” Abigail pulled a small flashlight out of her pocket and handed it over to her father.

Lecter stepped back towards the wall, but this time instead of opening the section of paneling they’d gone through to get to the boat house, he put pressure on the second lowest shelf of the bookcase they were closest to; the bookcase slid to the left, revealing another passageway, though not an earthen one this time. “Will, come with me.” The President spared one last glance to Abigail. “Count to fifteen before you start.”

She nodded, her eyes meeting Will’s for a moment before he stepped into the new secret passage with Lecter. The bookcase was moved back into place and as they walked quickly through a passageway that was pitch black save for the small flashlight, Lecter murmured. “You must relax.”

“Bit difficult when she’s screaming like that,” Will snapped as the sounds of the teenager’s frantic noises filled his ears in the most haunting manner.

Lecter paused and Will had a fleeting moment of panic at the unknown, then felt the President grabbing his hand, threading their fingers to establish a stronger hold on Will. He was lead through the passage way, up tight stairs and through narrow turns. It felt like they moved for hours, Abigail’s screaming becoming distant and then all together stopped; there was a pause for a moment as they exited out a hallway and then ran into a fireplace that opened at the back. Another set of stairs that
Will nearly tripped on and then across a maze of slender passages that forced them to walk sideways in some areas; he could hear commotion everywhere they went and then the President reached a dead end. The small flashlight was turned off and Lecter pressed on the end of the passage which tilted towards them.

As the President opened a door to their right which flooded everything with light, he said, “Hurry, Will. They’ll be here any moment.”

Lecter moved through with long strides and Will felt the tunnel opening swing shut behind him; as he stumbled through the open door, he tripped over pair of shoes and fell onto the cream-coloured carpet of the President’s bedroom. Scrambling to his feet as Lecter pulled the book he’d been reading off the bed and sat down in an arm chair, he felt the uncomfortable weight on the small of his back.

“Damnit.” Will still had the knife and he pulled it out of his waistband, out from under the sweater he’d put on earlier in the evening.

“Just take a deep breath,” the President instructed. “The satchel you carry. Place it at the bottom.”

Will rushed over to the bag that had been set neatly beside the President’s bedside table. “Right. Because when they come to drag us out, this is all we’ll be able to take—“

The door flew open just as Will slid the knife behind Hannibal’s second iPad, Jimmy Price rushing in with gun drawn. “Mr President!”

“Agent Price, what’s the matter?” Lecter asked, completely collected as Will froze over the bag

“There was an attack downstairs—someone got onto the property and assaulted Alana, tried to get Abigail.”

Agents Zeller and Katz were quick to swarm over to the President. “We need to get you out of here.”

Lecter stood, the book falling from his hands to the floor, his eyes wide and his face pale. “Abigail! Is she all right—“

“She’s fine—“

Lecter’s hand grabbed onto his upper arm as the Secret Service started to drag him out of the room. “No, he comes with us.”

The agents didn’t seem have time to argue—Price was barking orders and Will clutched to the bag in his arms with a death grip as he was pulled out of the room and down the stairs and through the sitting room and into the foyer and out the door and their armoured Cadillac was waiting with open doors for them to be shoved inside—

Abigail was already inside the car with Zeller and Will’s glasses were knocked off as he was shoved in after the President; Katz’s foot came down on them and they snapped against the driveway. Not that he was even worried about his glasses—it was mostly a passing observation that they were broken and forgotten as the door was slammed shut and the car’s tires churned up the loose gravel violently, hailing it against the undercarriage as the motorcade. Just the President’s main detail—Katz, Price, Zeller—sitting across from himself and First Family. The seats facing one another were just barely big enough to hold three people. Will was to the President’s left, caught between broad shoulders and a door that was sealed shut and eight inches thick. Abigail was to the President’s right and her father had pulled tightly against his side so that she was practically in his lap; her hands clung to him as the armoured car took an incredibly tight turn on the narrow road through the forest.
“Abigail, tell me what happened,” Price said, his face grave.

Abigail inhaled sharply as the heavy tires gained traction and propelled the car fast around another twisting corner; Will locked eyes with her, helpless. He would give anything for her not to have to answer these questions.

“There was this guy—he—I saw him standing over Alana and I tried to find my panic button—“

The world was becoming quieter, softer. ‘She’s not even wearing a scarf over her neck. I can see where her first dad tried to kill her,’ he thought to himself distantly. ‘All it would take is a quick and steady hand to reopen it and she would have bled out in the den and I wouldn’t have even been able to stop him.’

“He’s shaking,” someone said, maybe Beverly.

“Will, look at me.” He couldn’t bring himself to make eye contract so he watched Lecter’s mouth, nodding. “Abigail is safe. She’s with us.”

It hurt to breathe. “I think…”

The President began to pull the bag out of his hands and Will could feel the absence of the knife between his body and the iPad. “Don’t—“

“Very good, Will,” the President praised him, prying the bag loose. “You brought the bag with you. Very good.” The bag was placed between their feet and then the President’s hand came up behind Will’s head and without protest, he allowed Dr Lecter to treat him. “You are suffering from an anxiety attack. Lower your head to your knees—you’ll need to spread your legs slightly—and start taking deep breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Close your eyes. Inhale. Exhale. Relax your hands. Inhale—we are merely crossing the gateway—exhale. Inhale. Exhale.”

Will closed his eyes, trying to relax as the presidential motorcade hit at least seventy on the quaint forest roads. The sirens from the Secret Service vehicles blared obscenely ahead of them, clearing a path for the Lecters’ safe escape from Boring and back to the White House. The President’s hand rested on the back of his neck, his thumb soothingly rubbing at his nape.

“What did he look like?” Jimmy Price asked.

“I didn’t see him,” Will mumbled.

“He’s talking to Abigail, Will,” the President corrected.

Abigail’s voice was hoarse from screaming. “Uh, he had light coloured hair. Light brown I think.”

Will shivered, remembering the man’s tawny brown hair. God, there had been so much blood on Abigail’s hands.

“His eyes?”

“I don’t remember. Light skin, maybe a little older than me. I don’t know.”

Will could imagine Price talking into the microphone on his wrist. “Caucasian male, early to late twenties.”

Zeller spoke next. “How tall was he, Abbs?”

“Um, like, taller than me. Maybe five inches taller.” Her breath hitched. “I don’t think he’d shaved in
a few days.”

“What was he wearing?”

“Dark clothing. I really wasn’t looking.”

Brown boots. Dark jeans. Will couldn’t describe any of these things to the Secret Service because according to the proper timeline of things, he never saw anything. And according to the actual timeline of things, the man was never going to be found. The President’s hand squeezed the tense muscles of his neck and Will dropped his head further. Abigail continued to give vague descriptions of what the man had looked like, how he’d acted, that he’d had a large hunting knife with him and Will continued to focus on simply breathing; the knife in the bag at his feet seemed to scream its presence and Will wondered how long it would take before everyone else could hear it and Abigail would get in trouble—

“Can you sit up?” Lecter asked, his voice impossibly composed for such a chaotic and fraught event.

“This is why he got elected. He can remain levelheaded in times of stress.” “I think so.”

“Slowly,” Lecter instructed and Will didn’t get a nasty head rush, suddenly feeling the absence of the hand on the back of his neck.

“Are you okay?” Abigail croaked.

“Don’t worry about me.” He shook his head, humiliated he’d gone from being a protector to simply a man with eyes glazed over from a complete breakdown.

She nodded, eyes red and lashes wet with tears.

“Weren’t you heading down there, Graham?” Beverly asked, shaking him from his thoughts.

“Yes. But I didn’t end up doing it.”

“Did you see anything?” Price asked, look up at him from the notebook he was writing in.

“No.” Panic was starting to fill his blood stream and he missed Lecter turning his head slightly towards him, inhaling.

“Why didn’t you go all the way downstairs?” Zeller asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Am I under investigation?” Will’s voice was high and angry, quaking.

“No, I’m asking if you saw anything.” Zeller’s tone was becoming confrontational.

“I went back upstairs,” Will insisted.

“So you didn’t see anything?”

“No. I saw nothing.”

“Why were you going downstairs?”

“What does it matter?” Will snapped.

“Will was looking for me,” Lecter quickly interjected.
Will’s eyes met the President’s and he slowly nodded, because that was the truth. “I thought he might have gone downstairs. I heard him talking in a hallway and turned around.”

“We went upstairs together,” Lecter agreed. That was completely true. “Agent Zeller, as Will saw nothing, I must recommend that you cease your questions to him. It’s causing tension for all of us.”

“Is Alana okay?” Will blurted.

Beverly was adjusting her earpiece. “She’s okay from what we saw. Being taken to Baltimore with an agent for questioning and head scan. Guy hit her pretty hard.”

“If I may have silence,” Lecter requested and opened the satchel at Will’s feet, removing his personal cellphone. With one freehand, he hit two numbers on speed dial and held it to his ear. “Hello, Jack. There’s been an incident on the property.”

The rest of the car ride back to Washington DC was a whirlwind of words—the President speaking on the limo’s phone with various people, the three agents adjacent to them speaking amongst themselves and Will staring out the window he’d leant his head against eight-inch thick polyurethane, watching the Secret Service vehicles ahead of them clearing a path for Cadillac One.

When they were finally ushered up into the Residence—Lecter insisting that Will come along—Will sat on one of the benches in the Center Hallway, the bag holding the knife safely in his lap as he watched Lecter directing the Secret Service; it was fascinating how easily Lecter could command a room of people who were supposed to be directing him as the best course of safety. Abigail came to sit beside him, leaning behind him as though hiding and Will hoped that the agents would keep away from her. Will finally took her by the arm, leading her into the living room, where he shut the door behind them.

“Are you…” he took a step forward, unsure if she was sick or otherwise.

“I need a hug,” she murmured and before he could process what she’d said, her arms were around him, pulling herself closer to him.

“Oh.” He exhaled softly and with great hesitancy he put his arms around her as well.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this. I’m so sorry.”

“It was an accident.”

“But now you’re part of it, too. And I never meant for that to happen.”

“Abigail, if he wanted to hurt you, then there wasn’t anything else you could do,” he assured her.

She moved closer to him and he rest his cheek against the top of her head. He hadn’t hugged anyone in years and while he’d never admit it aloud, it felt almost therapeutic, that all the tension from last night could simply melt away for a moment. People didn’t turn to him for comfort and when they did, he was normally forced to flee because the intensity of an other’s pain was often too much for him to bear. But Abigail needed him and he couldn’t turn that away.

His mind took him back to the lake in Boring, rewriting the night in his head with a dream where he was standing beside Abigail, skipping stone across the still water. ‘Don’t look down,’ he told her, not wanting her to see the dead man’s body just beneath the surface. When he opened his eyes, Lecter was standing in the living room, shutting the door behind him. Will flinched slightly, immediately unsure if he was over stepping boundaries by hugging the other man’s daughter, but after a quick evaluation of the President’s face and body language, Will made the decision not to pull away just
yet. Lecter approached them silently and slipped a reassuring hand on her shoulders.

“You are safe with us,” he murmured, leaning down to look at her face. Abigail nodded, which moved Will’s head as well. Lecter continued speaking in a low and soothing tone.

“Can I sleep in your room tonight?” Her voice sounded so meek, a little girl who was scared. Will wanted to protect her from everything in the world.

The President nodded once. “Yes, my beloved. Of course you can.”

“Will, stay the night.” With great care, the President pulled her out of Will’s arms and folded his own around her protectively. “Please. For my peace of mind.”

Will said nothing, not knowing what he wanted. Abigail took the silence for herself.

“Can you get my pyjamas?”

Lecter smiled comfortingly. “Yes.”

She was led into the President’s bedroom; Will was left alone in the living room and he took the moment to school his breathing, not wanting to have another anxiety attack. He couldn’t take any more aspirin for the night and after completely losing it in the car—what the hell had happened there?!—he didn’t really need to have anything else that could make the Secret Service suspicious that he knew more than he was letting on. Or that he was suffering another mental breakdown and was a danger to anyone. Moving to the desk, he spotted several sheets of vellum laid out on the surface, art waiting to be finished.

There was a drawing of a nude woman from the back, the softness in her skin so apparent, Will felt as though he could brush his thumb across her thigh and feel the soft relief of flesh. Will wondered briefly if she was someone he’d ever met, if she was possibly a former lover of Lecter’s, or if she was nothing more than a quick dream caught on paper. Actually, there was a good likelihood this was just a rendition of a famous piece by a master of the classics. His hand lifted the sheet of paper to see what sketch lie beneath.

Executed in graphite was a striking detailed and startling image—Wound Man. An illustration they used a lot of in the early medical medical books, no doubt many of which Lecter had read; it showed different kinds of battle injuries, all to one figure. Will had seen it in a library once in Michigan. Will tore his eyes away and retreated to the mantle place to look at the brush strokes on the oil portrait of Jacqueline and John Kennedy.

The door to the bedroom opened and Lecter stepped out, quietly shutting the door behind him. Will kept his eyes from the drawings he’d rifled through and instead thought of how difficult it would be to get rid of a body with one of the rugs in this room.

“What were you doing downstairs?” Will asked.

“I went down to the library room to get a book on the local fish. When I didn’t find it there, I decided to look in the den where the rest of the wildlife books are.” Lecter took a step closer. “Why were you looking for me?”

“I had to put your lapel pin back in with your belongings and I saw the book on your bed. I wanted to see if you were interested in looking at the book I have on fly fishing.” It all sounded so stupid now.

“I was curious. I don’t know much of your hobbies, Will.”
Will tilted his head sharply to his right shoulder, trying to roll out the tension in his neck. “Yeah, well…”

There was a pause and the President asked, “Where would you like to sleep?”

“I don’t know if I can.” Will’s voice shook.

“You should. The adrenaline you are experiencing will wear off soon and you will be exhausted. You are welcome to the guest room across from Abigail’s bedroom or you can take the Lincoln Bedroom or Queen’s Bedroom.”

He gave a choked laugh that held no humour. “I can’t exactly take the couch.”

Lecter—ever fucking gracious—of course offered him just that. “If you would happen to feel comfortable sleeping on the couch, you are welcome to.”

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to answer that.”

The President walked slowly to stand by the windows behind the desk, his stately frame centred between the two red and grey striped curtains. Will, always following the other man, came to stand not far from him, looking out the window at the Front Lawn. The White House was illuminated as it always was and the grass of the lawn looked like a slick green slab. ‘If you slipped on that, you’d crack your skull,’ he thought to himself. ‘Just crack it open and never wake up. They could bury you in the vegetable patch to make the tomatoes grow. Beneath the herbs. Bouquet garni à la William Graham.’

Will realised he was holding his breath and when he exhaled, he could hear his exhaustion. The President turned to look at him and his voice was suddenly rich with an undercurrent of emotion he’d never heard from him before. “Who knows Abigail better than you and I? Or the burden she bears?” Will didn’t flinch when the President’s hand came to rest on his shoulder. “We are her fathers now. We have to serve her better than Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Than the legacy they want to burden her with.”

Will was quiet, unsure what to say. There was a man dead at the bottom of the Kennedy’s boat house, sunk and wrapped up in an expensive rug. Discarded and hidden. Lecter turned away.

“If you go to the Secret Service, then you murder Abigail’s future.” His voice became low. “Do I need to call my lawyer, Will?”

Will shook his head once.

“We cannot tell anyone.”

“I know,” he mumbled.

“Does this change the nature of our relationship?”

There was a flair of anger at how stupid a question that was. “Uh, yeah. We’re…” He made eye contact with the President and realised that he’d actually asked a different question. “I’m not going to quit. If anything, I have to stay now.”

The President’s expression relaxed considerably. “I am relieved to hear that, Will.”

“It’s for Abigail, but…” Will closed his eyes briefly, then turned his face away so he could look anywhere but at the man beside him. “I feel like I was the one who killed him.”
“Would you not trade places with her and hold the knife, instead?”

“In a heartbeat. She’s not…like me.” Will could feel his mental facilities were running low and he scrubbed a hand over his face. “You said we were her fathers.”

“I am not blind, Will. I know you think of her as your own daughter, that she is your surrogate family.”

It felt as though everything he could possibly dread was happening tonight and he felt the disgust in himself for projecting something so desperately. “Am I that pathetically obvious?”

“It’s not pathetic. She shows you kindness and wants it in return. She shows your trust and you are willing to give it back. And…” Lecter lowered his eyes. “I find myself happy to share. I know that—” The doorway to the living room darkened and they both turned. “Yes, Agent Price?”

“Sorry, sir. Just checking.”

“Thank you, Agent Price.” Lecter turned back to look at him as they were alone once more. “It is late, Will.”

Will’s eyes narrowed slightly. “What were you going to say?”

“You have my full faith that you love Abigail as much as I.” Lecter’s hand was still on his shoulder. As a man unable to leave his own mind, coils of something ugly and fearsome wrapped around his thoughts; the last thing he could ever want was for Abigail to end up broken like he was. “How are we going to keep this from…affecting her? This could really mess with her head.”

“Abigail is strong, Will.”

“People who kill someone accidentally, even if it is self defense, need therapy afterwards. Who is she going to be able to talk to?”

“She can talk to us.”

“What if…?” Will was so overwhelmed and he didn’t want to believe the situation was hopeless, but…

“What?”

“She has nightmares.” He swallowed hard. At this, Lecter smiled kindly. “Then we will help her through them. Together.”

“Partners in crime.” He gave a humourless smile, the words caught in his throat like a burr.

“Yes.” The President squeezed his shoulder slightly before letting him go. “Why don’t you sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom tonight, Will?”

“Are you sure that’s okay?” Will asked as he found himself led in the direction of the famous guest rooms.

“You need rest.”

****
As Hannibal walked back from the Lincoln Bedroom, feeling content that he’d contained a very disastrous situation without any problems as of yet, he caught the sound of the elevator and without scent or sound of footsteps, he knew it could only be Jack Crawford. Resigning himself to keep the conversation brief, he waited patiently for the man to round the corner and speak.

Jack stalked over to him. “How’s Abigail?”

“She’s upset but unharmed,” Hannibal assured.

Jack looked him over, brow furrowed. “You?”

How many times in his life had he been forced to respond to this very situation? “Shaken up.”

Jack nodded, his shoulders slouching slightly. “Alana’s okay. She’s at a hospital right now.”

“I am relieved to hear that.” And he was.

“Still haven’t found the guy.” Jack shuffled his feet and he looked conflicted between doing his job and being sympathetic. “We need to talk to Abigail in the morning for a full briefing.”

Hannibal nodded his head once. “I would expect nothing less.”

“Why is Will spending the night?” Jack asked and Hannibal knew it was more than just a question.

“We are all upset, Jack. Abigail would feel more comfortable if Will stayed.”

Jack’s smile was snide. “Will?”

“Psychological security doesn’t require an intimidating physical presence. She is looking for a familiar presence to reassure her that she will be protected,” Hannibal explained, a half truth.

“Seems awful close,” his Chief of Staff ventured.

Hannibal didn’t like his tone. “Is there something you wish to say, Jack?”

“The last thing we need is Freddie making something out of this.”

“Do you believe that someone within the White House is speaking to Miss Lounds?” Hannibal kept his movements subtle, but drew himself taller, the formable leader of the free world. Possibly without meaning to, Jack shifted his weight away from Hannibal, no longer comfortable next to him. “I will not tolerate leaks within my administration, Jack. Employees stay over to work late all the time. As far as anyone is concerned, that is what Mr Graham is doing.”

Jack’s smile was uneasy and spoke careful to placate him. “No one’s saying anything, Hannibal.”

Hannibal nodded, not blinking as he maintained eye contact with the other man. “I’m glad to hear that, Jack. Now if you’ll excuse me, I believe I should go to bed. It’s been quite a night.”

Jack’s jaw clenched slightly. “Goodnight, Hannibal.”

“Goodnight, Jack. Be safe.”

After watching Jack walk away, Hannibal entered the bedroom he claimed; Abigail was in her pyjamas and she stood by the window, gazing out across the front lawn. He came to stand beside her, studying her impassive expression in the dark of his room. He had slighted her over the body of Boyles and while under ordinary—rare—circumstances he had to reprimand her, tonight Will had
shown her an extraordinary amount of compassion that without something equal from himself could drive a wedge between them. It was time for damage control.

“Abigail, I would like to apologise for the tone I spoke with after I found you tonight. As your parent, I should never reprimand you for asking for my help. That is my duty as your father, to help you.” He shifted his face into a concerned expression. “I made a mistake and I hope you can find it in yourself to accept my apology.”

“It’s all right. You were right to be mad. I really fucked up.” She quickly corrected herself. “Messsed up.”

He forgave her—he could allow some leeway in her state. “You were scared. I would have likely done the same in your position.”

“So I can sleep with you tonight?”

He shook his head. “No, you may sleep on the chaise.”

“Thank you.” He could see she really wasn’t happy with the arrangement, but would never argue about it. “So…what did Will think?”

“He is willing to lie. For you.”

“For me?”

“He was worried.” No longer able to wait, he took the opportunity to feel the hands that had taken a life that evening. “How did it feel?”

She seemed hesitant to answer. “It felt good.”

“It should feel good to win.” He affectionately rubbed her shoulder, wanting to coax a smile out of her. And as always, he got what he wanted. Her lips curled up shyly at first, before his own grin prompted a happier smile from her. She knew he was right and that was what counted most. “I shall be giving you something for sleeping tonight. You need to rest.”

He left and returned a moment later with a glass of water and half of a sleeping pill. He gave them both over and she took the cut tablet without hesitation. He normally allowed her a full pill on the nights when she was upset, but he didn’t want her to become dependent on them lest she need one again the next night.

“Thank you,” she murmured, handing him the now empty glass.

“What did you do with the meat?” he asked curiously as he set the glass on the table in front of the fireplace, carefully centering it on a marble coaster. He had killed someone on Saturday night and the meat had been left behind at his cousin’s house. He’d have to send someone out to get that for him, but it was simply details.

“I had to hide it in my jacket pockets. I’m glad I didn’t decide to wear a sweater tonight.” She sat down on the chaise and unfolded a throw on the end. “I hid it in the guest room’s wet bar.”

He was unexpectedly relieved, less so that she’d been unable to recover the meat, but that she’d not been caught in the process. “I shall retrieve it in the morning.”

“I’m so sorry,” she apologised again, and while he never wished for her sadness, he was always grateful to be the one witnessing it.
“I know you are. And I love you.” He turned off the lamp.

“I love you, too.” She was the ghost at the end of his bed. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

*****

Will emerged bedraggled from the Lincoln bedroom the following morning, rubbing at the back of his neck as he yawned; he was planning to head downstairs and walk to the West Wing where he could grab a change of clothes from the bottom drawer of his file cabinet. He had no idea where his luggage had been taken.

And he wondered what the President had done with the man’s knife.

Lost in thought as he approached the elevator, he flinched upon seeing that Abigail was standing almost directly in front of him; she looked exhausted and was hunched over slightly with a dark green dressing gown wrapped around her.

“Good morning.” ‘She killed someone last night.’

“Hi.” Her voice was quiet and empty.

“Did you sleep well?”

“No really.” She looked down at the floor before returning her gaze to him. Behind her, the President had come out of his bedroom, in his pyjamas and dressing gown, hair still tousled from sleeping.

“Why don’t you go back to bed and we’ll bring you breakfast?” Will suggested.

She lifted her head slightly. “Breakfast in bed?”

Lecter had reached them at this point and seemed to find it to be good idea.”Yes, my love. You’re still tired.”

“I am,” she agreed.

“Will, why don’t you go into the kitchen? I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Will watched as Abigail was escorted back towards the Presidential bedroom, he tried to block out the memory of her hands covered in the brightest blood and the sound of her voice as she called to him for help—

He shook his thoughts free and went to the kitchen; Will had no idea what to cook that was up to the standards of a Lecter breakfast as he specialised in buying breakfast burritos at the gas station on the outskirts of Wolf Trap and McMuffins in the drive-through. He puttered around the kitchen at a loss, startling when Zeller came in to check the room as a point of routine. After spending too much time agonising over, ‘What do rich people eat for breakfast?’, he settled on his task of finding the proper ingredients necessary for something he figured would please anyone.

“What are you looking for?”

Will nearly cracked his skull open on the edge of the counter from how quickly he jerked his head up. Lecter—now fully dressed in a suit and impossibly polished—was standing behind him and Will didn’t want to accuse him of sneaking up on him, but he was tempted to.
“I’m looking for the pancake mix.”

“Comfort food. I make the batter from scratch.” Lecter began to retrieve mixing bowls, whisks, and pans. “Would you bring me four eggs and the buttermilk, Will?”

“Sure.” As Will brought back the ingredients and set them on the counter, he voiced the only thing on his mind—his focus on the task. “Uh, does she like chocolate chips or…I don’t know how she liked her pancakes when she was a child.”

Will suddenly felt at a loss because Abigail wasn’t his daughter and while he could intuit many things about her, he didn’t have memories of her childhood, which meant he was mostly useless here.

“She enjoyed fruit on the top. But you enjoyed chocolate chips in your pancakes, didn’t you?”

Will scratched at the back of his neck. “Yeah.”

“I shall make yours with chocolate chips, then. Will you please contact the flower department and have them bring up an assortment of tulips and daffodils? I think Abigail might appreciate something more simple than what we have here.”

Will didn’t protest; he was still incredibly jumpy, expecting the Secret Service to rush in at any moment with guns drawn to arrest them. Or worse, drag Abigail off for murder. But he stayed calm, ordering the flowers for the President, and then numbly assisting with the breakfast, his mind conjuring up images of what the anonymous man’s body would look like at the bottom of the lake. Blue lips, bloating skin, had they left his eyes open? Lecter assembled to the breakfast tray for Abigail, including a small lead crystal vase of daffodils (none of the tulips made the cut), and left to take it across the hallway to the President’s bedroom. Will rinsed a few of the whisks and bowls off, eating a small sliver of orange left on the cutting board. When the President returned, he plated their food and led them to the dining room.

The pancakes were delicious; Lecter had chipped a block of chocolate just for him, adding in a decadent amount to the batter. For all of thirty seconds, Will had tried to find himself too upset to eat, but honestly, what could possibly turn anyone away from cooking this good? The President had poured a thick syrup comprised of honey and orange on his pancakes and after Will stared at it, he reached across the table and poured it atop Will’s as well. There was a generous amount of bacon and the sweet turkish coffee he was becoming so fond of, as well as a wine glass filled with fresh squeezed orange juice. The dining room was lit with the gentle golden light from a warm, risen sun and Will felt so domestic in this tableau. Without a doubt, this was the best ‘morning-after-a-murder’ breakfast he could have hoped for.

Which really wasn’t something he wanted to be so comfortable with.

“I can’t think about her killing someone,” Will finally admitted softly, dragging a forkful of pancake through a puddle of the syrup.

The President took a sip of his coffee. “Then don’t.”

Will finished his bacon, only to have Lecter to add a few more slices to his plate. ‘I’m caring for them with food because it’s all I can offer them. My daughter and my friend have been dragged into a situation that is not only traumatic, but one that could possibly overshadow the rest of their lives. If I don’t maintain my own facade of—’

“Do you want to talk about it?” he whispered to the President. “Aren’t you…?”
He trailed off, eyes flickering up to meet the other man’s. And forced himself to maintain eye contact. He might be the freak in the room, but the very least he could do was try to offer comfort to the seemingly unflappable Hannibal Lecter. His breath was stuck in his throat as he engaged in a staring match with the President.

“I’ve never done this before.” Will’s confession made him feel helpless; he wasn’t entirely sure if he was referring to the offer of sympathy or the cover-up of a death.

Hannibal smiled, a patient and understanding gesture, and he lowered his gaze first.

“You are allowing it to get you. Finish your breakfast, Will.”

*****

After breakfast, Abigail had been questioned by the Secret Service and as she was a minor, Hannibal remained by her side, holding her hand to signal the direction her lies needed to take—squeezing when she needed to say, ‘I don’t know’, loosening his hold when she could improvise on the script they’d rehearsed at dawn. Will had stayed in his office, no doubt worried, terrified of what the Secret Service would learn. Hannibal reveled in the younger man’s anxiety when he finally came downstairs and after it became apparent Will was just going to be nothing more than a feast for the senses for the day—the scent of adrenaline and fear, the tense movements of a man worried about handcuffs, the brusque tone being used— Hannibal had sent him home with the recommendation that Will spend some time with his dogs and get some rest. Will had nodded, his eyes looking so much like Hannibal’s, though he did turn down the meal of Nick Boyle that Hannibal had hoped to send home with him.

After a light lunch alone (he’d sedated Abigail again and she was asleep in his bed), Bedelia made her appearance in his office. Hannibal offered his own chair behind the President’s desk for his cousin to sit in and she settled as comfortably as she ever did around him anymore. He retrieved a bottle of Shiraz produced illegally in Iran, a prized drink that he only ever brought out as a peace offering to her. Were he in a betting mood, he might speculate she was simply here because Abigail had ruined a rug and he’d sunk it to the bottom of her boat house.

He poured the Shiraz into one of his finest crystal glasses engraved with the seal of the President, a gift from their dear cousin Mary. “Bedelia, I hope you slept well after last night.”

She accepted the glass, playing with the stem to stir the wine in the bowl. “I did. And you?”

“Abigail and I slept well, thank you.”

Bedelia nodded as she remembered that he did have a daughter.

“And Mr Graham?”

Hannibal tilted his head slightly. “He said he slept well, too.”

They were quiet, focusing on their wine. Outside the office doors, White House employees stirred and hummed, faithful drones that served them, oblivious to the direction of life they were committed to within these consecrated walls. Other administrations might have experienced interruptions throughout the day, tolerating the lack of decorum and respect, but everyone that worked here now had enough sense not to intrude when the two cousins were together and those that lacked the sense not to bother them weren’t in positions to be around them in the first place.

Bedelia’s glass was nearly empty when she finally spoke again. “The Secret Service has informed me that the intruder on the property still hasn’t been caught, but his point of entry was discovered on
the north side of the property line. It appears he’d been camping out in the woods in anticipation that you and yours would show up.”

Hannibal wished he could have studied the man’s encampment, learn more about who he’d eaten, his nostrils suddenly recollecting the heady scent of blood.

“I have been assured that this will be kept absolutely quiet. No one will know.” He left his stance against the desk. “As long as Miss Lounds remains uninformed.”

He circled his cousin’s chair slowly; she didn’t seem perturbed by this, her posture still relaxed.

“It would certainly be unfortunate if the secrets of Daddy’s house were discovered. By her or the Secret Service. I’m sure everyone will keep their mouth shut, Hannibal,” she told him, giving him a smile that was meant to look comforting.

He returned her smile and poured her more wine.

“And the floor in the den is looking rather bare,” she commented, giving him a look that confirmed she really was just here about the rug and he chuckled.

“I shall have something ordered immediately.”

“Something that compliments the house, Hannibal. Not just your ego.”

“Anything for you, Bedelia.”
A Tattle-Politics EXCLUSIVE!!!

Rumour has it that the night of April 21st, the First Family was caught up in something a little fishy.

While the White House Press Secretary Phyllis Crawford has claimed the reason the First Family were brought back early to the White House was due to a scheduling conflict on Monday morning (when they were due to return), yours truly has learned from a reliable source in the Baltimore medical field that Vice President Du Maurier’s personal assistant Alana Bloom was admitted to John Hopkins Hospital that night with a head injury due to being struck by a hard object. And yes, loyal readers, the unstable Will Graham was there that night. Just what is the White House trying to keep quiet?

Expect more information in the coming days!

*****

Five days before the White House Correspondents’ Dinner was to be held, which was also two days after the death of Mr Nichols, Hannibal made a decision that he’d been eager to bring about. Summoning Jack into his office during a lapse in activity, he informed him of the decision he’d made.

“We are not going to use Mr O’Brian as a host this year. I shall call him myself to explain that I don’t feel it is appropriate to have a comedian during such a sombre time in our nation. There are children dead and injured, as well as numerous adults. I would not feel comfortable with such performance.” He handed over a list that he’d asked Will to compile earlier that morning. “Here are the performers I would like to take the place of Mr O’Brian. Inform them that songs of patriotism or hope would be favoured.”

As was expected, Jack was not happy with the decision, but wasn’t going to fight it. “We’ll need to give Conan something in return to ensure we stay on his good side.”

“We shall.”

Hannibal smiled slightly as Jack left the office. He had absolutely no interest in a comedy hour of which he would be the subject; while he enjoyed humour and was even capable of laughing at himself, he didn’t find late night talk show hosts particularly funny, nor did he feel a desire to spend an evening with people who already had inflated egos. A night that was somewhat sombre in nature would humble those who needed to be humble and remind the nation that he didn’t take tragedy lightly. Well, when tragedy suited him. Originally he’d intended in revealing one of Miriam Lass’ arms to the public to get the event canceled over all, but this actually worked much better for him. The nation could also use it as a time of reflection and he’d be labeled with terms ‘no nonsense’ and ‘compassionate’.

Later that afternoon he brought Will into his office to consult with him on the new marketing of the healthcare law; the majority of the Republican majority in congress was showing great resistance to
the law and attempting to rally support from their constituents to get the law repealed. Will had a few ideas worth pursuing and Hannibal found that he enjoyed talking about otherwise uninteresting strategies with the younger man because of the glimpses into his psyche—damaged, full of dark humour, hunger. The potential for friendship was growing as the scent of the encephalitis was dwindling.

There were interrupted by Bedelia whilst contemplating how to reach the south-western states with advertisement and upon making eye contact with Will, she dismissed him with a flick of her wrist; Will scowled at her for a moment, but quickly made his face neutral as he glanced over at him. Hannibal assured the younger man they’d continue the conversation at a later point in the evening, trying not to laugh at how easily his cousin could nettles his assistant. Once alone, he retrieved a Damassine that was fragrant enough to fill the room; while he would normally save such an eau de vie for after a meal, he could tell from her body language that she wanted something stronger than just their usual wine.

She stood by the White House flag behind the desk, her fingernails scratching against the talons of the eagle. “Hannibal, I hear you’ve changed the host of the Correspondents’ Dinner?”

“Yes, Bedelia. Our nation is in mourning and it would not do to have an event that celebrates the imagined follies of our administration.” He looked out to the front lawn and the gates that held back protesters demanding an end to the conflicts in the Middle East.

“You are still attending,” she pointed out.

“I must present the Edgar A. Poe Memorial Award, I’m afraid.”

“Understandably.”

He shifted his eyes back to her. “It’s unfortunate you’ll be unable to attend.”

She gave a simpering smile. “Yes. There’s just so much work to do. But that is our burden.”

Hannibal lifted his glass in a toast. “To our burden.”

*****

Hannibal held up two of his silk ties, one of rich burgundy paisley and the other one an illustrious mauve. Both were complementary to Will Graham’s palette, and were certainly of better taste than the cheap polyester he was so inclined to wear.

“Which one?” he asked.

Abigail, who was sitting on the corner of his bed with a leg crossed and hands resting on her knee, tilted her head and asked in her most professional voice, “Which one do you think?”

She has been in a mood the whole morning, playing psychiatrist, and he found it charming, so he humoured her. “The burgundy.”

“He likes your navy Tom Ford,” she said and he raised an eyebrow. She was attempting to influence the outcome of his decision and if she wanted to be a psychiatrist, she would need to be more subtle about it.

“I was intending on wearing that one,” he told her, making the mental note to show her how to properly manipulate a patient. “Though I suppose I could wear the burgundy…”
She smiled and for a moment he saw that it was Bedelia’s smile on her face. “May I take it to him?”

****

“Are you busy?”

Will hadn’t heard anyone approaching the half open door of his office and certainly hadn’t been expecting the young First Lady.

“Abigail.” He stood up abruptly from the desk, eyes wide and worried. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” She glanced down to his fidgeting hands. “And you?”

“I’m…” He quickly set down the paper clip he’d been bending out of shape. Could there be secrets between them anymore? No, perhaps not. “Anxious.”

She nodded, looking contemplative. “Because of the dinner?”

“Crowds.” He didn’t like being surrounded by large groups of people, let alone in a social setting. If he’d been allowed to drift around the edges of the function, it might not be so bad, but he’d seen the seating chart this morning and he was right at the front of the stage between Press Secretary Crawford and someone from the Gotham Tribune, the evening newspaper that was once owned by Robertas Lecter.

Abigail sat down on the edge of the arm chair across from him. “Just put one of those bluetooth earpieces in and pretend you’re on the phone with the White House. You won’t have to socialise. If you want, I can text you the whole night.”

Will snorted at that idea, sitting back down at his desk. “I don’t know what your dad would think of that.”

She raised her eyebrow and gave him a smile that looked very much like the President’s. “It doesn’t have to be fake. We could discuss politics, if you wanted. It’s not weird for the First Lady to be in contact with the President’s office.” She turned her face slightly, eyes moving towards the wall. “But if you’re not comfortable with that…”

“I…might take you up on that.” He was grateful that she was extending him that courtesy and wondered if she needed a lifeline from him. “Are you…?

Her eyes met his. “I’m hanging in there.”

“Good.” He looked to her cheek, unable to maintain the eye contact. “Good.”

“Oh, before you go, I thought you could borrow one of Dad’s ties for tonight’s dinner.” She pulled a very neatly rolled sash of navy out of her sweater’s pocket.

He blinked and then tried to protest. “Oh, I…”

She brought it over to him and he unrolled it, lying out across his desktop. “Dad thought it would look nice on you.”

“Well, he probably knows more about that than me,” he mumbled as he thought embarrassedly about the grey tie he’d planned on wearing to the dinner simply because it was cleanest. It dawned on him that she had walked here by herself and that went against everything he and Lecter had agreed on. Standing up so fast he almost knocked over his chair, he blurted out, “I—I can walk you back to
your office.”

She looked startled. “Oh, thank you.”

Will lingered closely to her as they walked out through the front of the White House, knowing he was lingering closely to her, but he his desire to protect her was overwhelming. She waved in the general direction of the tourists at the front gates, smiling in case anyone was taking a photo and he huffed softly; this world she inhabited wasn’t one that could allow for her to be anything else but strong and he felt it gnawing within him that she was pushing everything down into the depths of her mind. Brains were not meant to be abysses and he longed to be the support she needed.

When they finally reached her office in the East Wing, he held the door open for her. “Thank you again for bringing the tie.”

She hesitated for a moment, then squeezed his shoulder gently. “Sure.”

*****

That night as Will dressed for the dinner, he stood in front of the mirror in his bathroom, taking extra care to make a symmetrical knot. Will had always liked this particular tie the best; not that he paid much attention to Hannibal’s ties, but this one had caught his eye with the colour—reminding him of the inky ocean depths—and it was one of the few ties the President wore that didn’t have a pattern on it. Power without aggression. It was the perfect colour for a world leader. Will looked at himself in the mirror and drew himself up straight, turning slowly to look at himself.

“This is my house and none shall go hungry in my house.”

An agent drove Will to the White House where he travelled via motorcade with the President to the dinner. Lecter sat at the head table on the dais, making polite conversation with those around him as Will sat at a table nearby with absolute strangers—Crawford hadn’t shown up and while he didn’t know her personally, she was at least familiar. He kept his eyes trained on the President, wishing for any excuse to have to get up and assist him with whatever little petty request Lecter might need fulfilled. But when that seemed futile, he decided to go with his fall back plan of texting Abigail.

{there is no one here that i know}
{is the music good?} She replied a moment later.

He glanced up to whomever was singing at the moment. {not listening}

Her next text came about a minute later. {battery is dying can’t txt sry}

He gave a crestfallen, {OK}

He shoved his BlackBerry back into his jacket’s inner pocket. He rubbed his hand against his cheek, wondering momentarily if he should have shaved earlier that evening, then returned his attention to the plate in front of him. The food was decent, though he didn’t particularly care for the way the fish was cooked; having grown up on creole recipes for his seafood, the cod on the plate before him was fairly flavourless and he picked at it aimlessly, suddenly hearing his doctor’s reprimanding tone that he needed to eat on a regular schedule instead of his scavenging for a meal. Her disapproval at his diet was really the only reason he even had food in his fridge.

At a certain point the dinner had cooled too much to be appetising and he wrinkled his nose, waiting for it to be brought away. He hadn’t particularly like the wine served, either. Lecter always had something better and while Will still really had no understanding of wine, he definitely liked the
President’s. Dessert was something that reminded Will of custard, served in a chocolate shell and topped with a spun web of sugar and before anyone could eat it, the President had returned to the podium to recite a speech of his thanks for the ‘lovely night’ and reminded everyone to keep the survivors of the Boston bombing in their thoughts and prayers.

After dessert, everyone began to mingle with one another. Will looked around the room filled with people all laughing and talking, touching hands to elbows and offering embraces and handshakes to the ones they were familiar with or wanted to be familiar with. Being so out of place among these people was almost a physical pain that manifested itself in his chest; there were people who smiled politely and said ‘hello, wow you did such a great job on the campaign, bet you’re glad to give up that shitty teaching job to work for Lecter!’ It was not an unfamiliar feeling, but understanding that didn’t make it any less harder to acknowledge. Sad and lonely—were those the only words he was doomed to describe himself with? How could he ever belong to someone or have someone belong to him when he could never escape the world in his head? Everyone here had someone and he was just Will.

And then suddenly someone was standing beside him, close enough to catch his attention, but still respectfully distanced. He knew who it was before he turned, some strange instinct at the change of the aura in the room and perhaps the faintest hints of aftershave that he managed to catch without realising it.

The President smiled at him, Beverly and Zeller a respectable distance behind him. “Will.”

“He nodded his head politely.

“I insist you call me Hannibal, Will. We are friends, are we not?” Will supposed he was a friend by some definition—they’d gotten rid of a body together, after all. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

“No at all,” he replied without hesitation.

“Neither am I, and misery loves company.” The President leaned in and lowered his voice. “May I show you the building?”

Will couldn’t help but smile in relief. “Gladly.”

The President murmured something to his agents and as quietly and discreetly as possible, they were led to a side door. Escorted up to an empty second floor hallway, Katz, Zeller, and Price all kept respectful distances, their appearance never once suggesting that they were keeping a keen eye on them. Will cleared his throat loudly before offering something to say.

“They call this ‘nerd prom’. You’d think I’d be able to manage a date for something called ‘nerd prom’.”

“Many of us end up without companions for the night. Myself included.”

“You’re not a nerd here, trust me. You’re the accomplished…prom king,” he finished lamely. Lecter raised an eyebrow. “I was never prom king, Will. They don’t have one at John Hopkins.”

“No, I suppose not.” Will shoved his hands in his pockets as he looked at the walls. “So you didn’t want to be here tonight, either. This doesn’t really seem to be your kind of party.”

“Not at all. Too many sheep and pigs, too few lions.”

“Hard to find a function in Washington without pigs,” Will grumbled. “Why are all those celebrities
invited? I don’t even know who half of them are.”

“Jack believes it is beneficial to the administration as they were supporters during my campaign. Next year we shall not owe them the same courtesy.”

“At least you didn’t have to tell jokes.”

The President’s lips quirked. “Small favours.”

“Your wit would escape them,” Will complimented.

“Most likely. It wouldn’t have been fair if I was making the jokes only for you,” Lecter replied.

Will had no idea how to respond to that so he decided to turn the attention away from him. “Chilton looked like he wanted to punch you during your speech.”

Both former presidents Bush and Chilton had attended the dinner, sitting on the opposite side of the room to Will.

“His presence is a mockery in and of itself—I didn’t have to make any jokes to humiliate him. He isn’t worth my time.”

Will had to agree. “People are going to notice that. They’ll be talking about it on the Sunday shows for sure.”

“They should. I don’t want anyone to think his administration has any influence on mine.” As they passed large framed photographs of various civil rights activists, Lecter asked, “Are you hungry? I noticed you weren’t touching your food tonight.”

“Uh, being in a crowded room makes my stomach too nauseous to handle food.” It was probably the truth for why he hadn’t been hungry, though the bland fish had also contributed.

“Why don’t we leave early and I can cook you a late dinner?” It sounded less like a suggestion and more like a request.

“Cook for me? No, it’s too late at night and tomorrow…”

The President smiled as though he found Will’s constant refusals ridiculous. “Stay over. There are plenty of guest rooms.

“Are…are you serious?”

“Very. Imagine how surprised Abigail would be to see you in the kitchen before her.” When Will didn’t answer right away, he added, “Will, I insist.”

“Okay.” An embarrassed smile found its way to his lips and he bowed his head. “Okay.”

“Good. Let’s leave.”

As they walked down the hallway, Will found the silence overbearing. “I enjoyed the performers tonight.”

“Did you? I selected them myself.”

“You did? They don’t seem your type. But they were very good.”
“Last year I found myself in a position where it was in my best interest to know about current music.” The President’s smile was teasing and it took a moment for Will to connect the dots.

“You know about all of them because I recommended you know about it?”

“Tonight’s musical numbers were the fruits of your labour, Will—“ The President abruptly touched his arm, bringing them to a halt. Will opened his mouth to find out what was wrong, but quickly identified the interruption in their conversation. “Miss Lounds.”

Unlike the President, Will didn’t hide his contempt for the tabloid writer; dressed in emerald green and wearing the cloying smile that he imagined anytime he heard her name, she’d seemed to notice them leaving the main room and had figured out a way to intercept them by sneaking through another entrance to this particular hallway. Will wondered briefly if she had a false White House ID to get herself past less savvy agents (something he’d certainly talk to the President about) or if she had bought someone off with offers of money and book deal at a later date. Will found her to be one of the most crass people in the political world, not even worthy of attending this function with the title of ‘journalist’, as that implied she operated under some level of integrity.

"President Lecter, how are you?" Her eyes flit over to him, holding out a hand as the sound of running footsteps behind them alerted them to the fact that the Secret Service would be shortly removing her from their presence. "Mr Graham, hi. You might not remember me—"

"I dealt with you after Mason Verger was arrested.” He did not accept her hand and kept his tone curt.

“Mr President—"

While there was no doubt that the Secret Service had already identified her as merely Freddie Lounds and not a grand security threat, but the general distaste for her seemed to be fuel for rough handling. She was slammed against the wall roughly and frisked for weapons. Lecter watched with general disinterest and Will with seething hate.

“Miss Lounds, you will go with these agents willingly and you will not seek us out again. Do you understand?” The President asked as she was cuffed.

She hadn’t lost her smile. “I’d really like an interview.”

The President smirked. “Good evening, Miss Lounds.”

“Don’t let the door hit you on the way out,” Will muttered, watching her get dragged away. “She’s very…crafty at finding ways to get to what she wants.”

“She used to bother you, I understand.”

Will snorted in disgust. “Well, I haven’t been big ticket news in a while. Of course, she didn’t miss the opportunity to imply that I attacked Alana back in Boring.”

“This is the second time she’s gotten close to you and Abigail. Have you considered that she’s paying someone on the inside to get access?” Will asked, keeping his voice quiet so that the Secret Service didn’t overhear.

“Apparently she crawled through the duct work in Sidwell Friends, so there is no grand conspiracy in that matter.” Lecter turned to Price who had remained at his side. “We shall be returning to the Residence now.”
The ride back to the White House felt considerably more relaxed than it had been in the days since Boring House; Lecter made passing commentary on the historical neighbourhoods they were traveling through and after a moment, Will realised they were driving the scenic route back, which was actually nice. Lecter seemed to not be talking for the sake of filling silence with his words, but for sharing information. Will didn’t know much about DC’s history and recalled the President’s love of architecture, something that had been mentioned last summer; while he was sure he’d never have a need for the story behind certain brick work or arches over doorways, it was still interesting. Well, not really, but he did feel it was a privilege that Lecter was taking the time to do it.

At the Residence, Lecter motioned for Will to continue on ahead without him. “I’m going to say goodnight to Abigail. Go wait in the kitchen.” Will for less than three minutes before Lecter arrived. “She’s already asleep.”

As the President went over to the fridge, Will felt the coiling guilt that someone was troubling themselves over him. “You don’t have to do anything fancy. You’ve already let me borrow your tie.”

Lecter said nothing, letting his smile act as his reply instead as he pulled out various ingredients. Will sat down at the counter, curious at first and then surprised when he realised what the President was making. Sandwiches—roast beef carved and cold, a horseradish mustard that made Will’s mouth water, dark rye bread that had been baked in the White House kitchens, and fresh tomatoes.

“I shall have one, too,” Lecter said as he set out two plates.

“You’re hungry?”

“Tonight’s dinner was not as filling as I’m used to.”

Will watched in silence as the President assembled the sandwiches, wishing there was something he could offer to do, but did at least think to gather two paper towels to use as napkins.

“Unfortunately it is too cold to sit on the veranda. Shall we go to the greenhouse instead?” Lecter asked when he finished.

“I’d like that.”

Will insisted on carrying his plate and the bottle of wine the President selected while Lecter carried the two glasses and his own dinner. Will wanted to say something about the paintings on the walls that they walked past, but knew he’d just give away that he didn’t know anything about art, so he kept his mouth shut. When the reached the rooftop, they nodded to the patrolling agents that greeted them with a “Good evening, Mr President, Mr Graham,” and continued to the glass greenhouse that was warm and slightly humid. At the back, between rows of herbs and calla lilies was a pair of cast iron garden chairs and a small table situated betwixt those.

The President’s head tilted upwards slightly to look out the glass rooftop. “It is a pity we cannot see the stars.”

Will had to agree; while the White House was a nice place, anywhere that couldn’t let him look at the stars would never be a home. “When I was growing up in Louisiana, I could always see the stars. Always.”

“Which is why you live in Virginia on the edge of the reserve.”

“Right. I can see the stars every night.”
“I would like to see the stars at night. I sense their presence, but to view them is such a gift.” The President raised his wine glass toward’s Will. “To your good fortune.”

Will brought his glass to Lecter’s. “To stars.” After another moment, he added, “This is a really good sandwich.”

“I agree. I sometimes forget the simple pleasures of making one. Thank you for reminding me.”

They ate—well, Will devoured while Lecter took regular bites—and as Will finished the last of the crust, the President poured him another glass of the Chardonnay that was far nicer than what had been served at the dinner that night. Will murmured his thanks and as he watched the President’s face, drinking the alcohol, he thought it might be appropriate to ask something that had been bothering him.

“Are you okay?”

“Why do you ask?” There was a twinkle in the President’s eyes as he understood the unasked portion of the question. “You are thinking about Nicholas Boyle.”

“I…” He gave a humourless laugh. “You handle this with so much decorum.”

“Does it weigh heavy on your mind, Will? His death?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” The President raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you are not merely concerned about Abigail’s wellbeing?”

“I don’t know.” Will couldn’t keep any of his thoughts about the matter straight anymore—it seemed like a massive conglomerate of anxiety lodged in his chest. “I know I’m concerned about her. I’m… terrified she’s going to have nightmares. That she’s always going to be looking over her shoulder for someone who wants to arrest her. I don’t want this to ruin her life.”

“Abigail is a strong person.”

“I know.”

“I regret she had to resort to such methods to defend herself.”

“Me, too.” Will took the opportunity to address the other thing that had been nagging at him. “You said that ‘we’ are her fathers. Why?”

“Because I see you, Will.” Lecter raised his wine glass to his lips.

He thought that was bullshit. If Lecter could see anything, Will would be out of a job. “How do you see me?”

There was no humour when the President spoke next. “As the mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.”

It was always impolite to stare, but Will couldn’t help it; Lecter seemed so convinced that that was the truth and what if it was? What if Will was capable of catching bad things rather than just seeing them?

“Tell me how you do it,” the President asked, breaking the silence.
“Do what?”

“How you get inside these politicians’ heads.”

He’d tried to answer to question once before to the New Orleans PD when he was seventeen, attempting to help them catch a rapist. He’d failed miserably at communicating though and had been held in the drunk tank until he’d been cleared of being psychotic or the rapist himself. But Lecter was a smarter man than the police officers he’d dealt with and perhaps if anyone could understand, it would be him.

“There’s a, a pendulum—silver—and it swings back and forth, un…unraveling, unwrapping them. I see things—the way they don’t want to be seen. All the little details get pieced together and I see…”

“What do you see, Will?”

Perhaps it was the wine or the warm food in his stomach, but Will found the way Lecter spoke very trustworthy and earnest. Could he trust Lecter?

“I see within them. All…the little gears that wind away, all the bones and sinews that hold them together and all their faces. I see the ones who want to destroy everything they touch and the ones who want to devour the poor and the ones that want to prop their feet up on everyone else’s work. All these polished teeth and carefully cut hairs, bags of skin sewn up around pollution and cocaine. I hear their words—recycled speeches that have the latest buzzwords so that the masses salivate like Pavlov’s dogs.” He buried his face in his hands, unable to keep the words from spilling out. It was the first time he’d ever admitted what exactly it was he saw and he couldn’t bear to look at anything while saying it. “I feel them walking and fucking and screwing everyone over so that they can have the spotlight on them for five minutes more. They have all these games and tricks and I see them all.”

The President’s voice was neutral. “I, alas, have never been anyone but myself.”

“Well, if I could let you have my ‘gift’, I would gladly give it over to you.” Will would give anything to get rid of it, so he could see himself.

The President set his glass of wine down and stood up. “Come with me.”

Will made to take the plates back with him, but Lecter assured him that he could send someone else to collect them. Will fought back the urge to run, because he’d just said some seriously stupid things out loud to a man who wouldn’t tolerate a half-insane analyst in need of a good shave, who couldn’t talk to people or get a date with Alana, who wanted to be the father of a daughter who already had a father, while the paintings of dead presidents follow him as he allowed himself to be led through the Residence, past Secret Service who always look at him with the wariness one would give to a bomb that a stranger claims is defused, and now he was hurrying behind Lecter into the living room—

“What is that?” he choked out as Lecter placed a plain brown file into his hands—he’d been expecting a noose, not papers that had been in the desk that had once held the sketch of Wound Man.

“The Chesapeake Ripper’s ninth victim.”

Were Will a different man, he might have dropped the file in shock. Instead, his hands clench it harder. “You’re allowed to have the FBI’s case files for the Chesapeake Ripper’s ninth victim?”

“I have all of the case files.”

“One of the few blemishes on your record.” Will was quick to add, “Not that I think a governor
should be held accountable for what a serial killer does.” The President nodded and Will asked. “So why do you have these?”

The President tilted his head slightly, watching Will’s face. “I suppose you could consider it to be a hobby of mine.”

“Crime buff?” Now Will had never pictured Hannibal Lecter as someone who would find interest in that particular field, though he could now consider how intellectually stimulating it must be to him—solving puzzles made out of flesh, misery, and facts.

“It’s fascinating.”

Will frowned, pretending that he didn’t understand what it felt like to feel the obligation to solve grave problems like this. “It’s not your responsibility to solve these murders, you know.”

Lecter’s eyes still hadn’t blinked. “What do you see?”

Will opened the file hesitantly and looked down at the large 8x11 photo paperclipped to the inside of the file; there was a man lain on grass, his chest cavity split open and filled with flowers that spilt out past the spread ribs.

“A psychopath,” Will said simply, looking away from the photo.

“Is that all?”

Will huffed. “I’ve told you before that my thoughts aren’t tasty. Am I even allowed to look at these?”

The President’s voice was lower. “Tell me what you see, Will.”

Oh.

Under many circumstances Will had been asked to perform, to demonstrate what he could see within others, but instead of the usual, “tell me what my rival is thinking,” the President was asking him to use his empathy for something…far more interesting. He lowered his eyes back down to the gruesome photos over with a strange feeling of detachment, reading over small details—killed on location in a public park, missing spleen, liver, and heart—before taking a deep breath and closing his eyes. ‘Backwards’, he thought to himself, watching the silver pendulum swing slowly from the right to the left to the right to the left…

The body was draped out on a grassy rise in a municipal park in Baltimore and the flowers floated away, the body closing and clothes sewing themselves back in place. It was dark out, early morning before the sun had come up. Will could feel the chill off the ocean a few miles away and it felt like home. He was dressed in a suit (that’s what politicians wear and was his mind’s default) and quickly shook that away, dressing himself in his own clothes—people didn’t actively kill people in suits. He stood in front of the body and looked down at it; suddenly, he was rushing forward, cutting him open, and the man’s arms suddenly began to flail against where he’d been staked to the ground—Oh, he was still alive. Will liked that better. He parted the warm body and found the ribcage, cracking it open to form a vessel and gave him better access…for what? Will looked at the knife in his hand. The man howled against the gag in his mouth, eye rolling wildly. Will had straddled the man’s thighs and began to whisper amused taunts that didn’t actually have words, just a feeling of animosity towards the man. Will’s knife began to cut, removing various organs (“You won’t need these anymore.”) and set them off to the side where they disappeared. Pulling off the blue surgical gloves on his hands (“I don’t want to leave fingerprints. The police already know my signature—they don’t need anything else.”), Will spotted a white pastry box beside him and he grabbed it
curiously, opening the lid to find what was inside. An abundance of very fragrant flowers. Will breathed in deeply and smiled, finding a second pair of surgical gloves that he put on. Carefully he began to place the flowers in the gaping cavity, knowing where each blossom went, each in a careful design (“This is my design.”). It wasn’t something he usually did and were the man still alive, he wouldn’t deserve to be transformed into something so beautiful—

Will’s eyes opened and he exhaled softly.

“He’s an artist. He was trying to make the scene beautiful. He’s picked colours to compliment the sunrise because that’s when the body would most likely be found. Delicate colours…colours that compliment…femininity. He’s trying to talk to a woman.” He kept his eyes closed, trying to push his mind into the spaces and crevices of information he’d read about crime as a teenager. All sorts of small words and images came crawling out like centipedes and lampreys, latching onto him. He opened his eyes. “He’s…humiliated the victim, but he wants the audience to think it’s art.”

“Audience?”

Will nodded. “It’s his speech—his statement. Whomever he was trying to talk to—probably whoever found the body—is his audience.”

There was little blood on the flowers, their creamy white and blush coloured petals left intact. Roses, daisies, tulips, a smattering of orchids, delicate hydrangea blossoms—

“He thinks it’s pretty. Dainty. See how I arranged—he arranged the…” He cringed, taking a step away from the President. He’d spent years teaching himself never to refer to the subject of his thoughts in the first person and now he’d just destroyed all that. He knew he needed to quickly assure the President that he wasn’t the actual Chesapeake Ripper. “Sorry. When I get into a different mindset…”

The other man didn’t look perturbed and finished the sentence. “You become them. Please continue.”

Will paused, watching Lecter carefully until he was certain that he could keep speaking freely. “He arranged them to maximize the area used. Not a single inch went to waste.” Images and connexions rushed through his mind. “Have you ever seen those hand painted teapots? With the little roses and violets?” Lecter nodded and Will continued. “It’s—it’s supposed to look like that. Sweet. Delicate.” The body’s form seemed more relaxed than how it looked in the photo. “Was the body moved before the photos were taken?”

Lecter leaned over and flipped over three pages of the report. “The body was moved by a homeless man in the area before the patrolling officer arrived on the scene.” His long index finger traced beneath the words he was citing.

That fit wonderfully in Will’s mind, a grotesque calmness in the knowledge. “The body wasn’t originally posed like this. It was…placed in a more appealing shape. The limbs would be curved restfully, not like someone was checking for a pulse or a wallet.” He studied the man’s clothing, reading all the little details he could find. “Who was he?”

The President didn’t have to look at the file. “Victor Strauss, an EMT responder.”

Will glanced over, an eyebrow raised momentarily before looking back at the next photo. “Did you know him? You were both in the medical profession.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t.”
Will had to ask the obvious. “Did they try to trace where the flowers had been purchased from?”

“Yes. There were no leads.”

Will wasn’t surprised by the answer. “They must have been purchased separately and then combined into this ‘bouquet’.”

“Bouquet?”

“It’s, uh, a bouquet. I don’t really know what else to call it.” He dropped finger to tap at the centrepiece of the arrangement. “Look at how he placed a Madonna Lily in the position of the heart.”

“To Catholics it’s considered a sign of purity,” Lecter suggested.

Will’s eyes narrowed slightly as he looked closer at the flowers. “In the South, the Madonna Lily is considered a racist emblem. It’s how the white supremacists in the late 1800s identified themselves to one another.”

The President raised an eyebrow. “Do you think there could be a racist angle, Will?”

“I don’t know. Worth exploring.” He looked at Lecter suspiciously. “Should I be looking at this?”

“The FBI has been willing to humour me. I’m sure they won’t mind your eyes on the files.”

“Any insights?” Will asked.

“I’m much more interested in your thoughts.”

Will looked down at photo again. “Now I’m wondering if there are any other potentially racist symbols at the other crime scenes.”

“Would you like to look at the files?”

Will quickly shut the file. “No, no…it’s so late. I need to go home.”

For a moment it looked as thought Lecter wished to remind him that he’d already been offered the opportunity to stay over, but then he nodded. “Of course.”

“Will that be all, President—uh, Hannibal?” The man’s given name felt almost familiar to say.

“Yes, Will. Shall I see you tomorrow for breakfast?”

Will’s stomach already felt hungry in anticipation of the President’s cooking. “Yes.”

Lecter walked with him to the elevator. “Goodnight, Will.”

“Goodnight.”

*****

Once Will was gone, Hannibal went into his bedroom, setting the file on the duvet. The door to the dressing room was open and though the room was dark, he could smell the faint wisps of incense and his daughter’s perfume. “Why don’t you come out of the shadows, Abigail.”

She stepped out of the darkness of the dressing room, her eyes bright. “I was feeding Mischa. I was lonely.”
He smiled to her as she took a seat on the edge of his bed and he began to loosen his bow tie. “And now you needn’t be lonely at all.”

“You showed these to Will, didn’t you?” she asked, picking up the file and looking at the photos.

“He called,” Hannibal gestured to the file, “art.”

“What?”

“He declared it a tribute to a woman I loved.” He removed his jacket and placed it on the hanger he’d left on the handle to his closet.

“He can see it.” Her smile was filled with so much love and adoration he could hardly breathe. “You made it for me just because it was Tuesday.”

“Am I not allowed to invent reasons to give you gifts?” he teased as he removed his cufflinks, setting them in the valet tray beside the closet door.

She grinned at him, the same lovely smile she had when she first entered his life. “You’re allowed. I like being spoilt.”

“You’re not spoilt. You’re a temple that deserves great offerings.”

“We ate the liver with sauteed plums and asparagus. Arugela salad with walnuts and goat cheese,” she reminisced.

“The goat cheese was too much,” he admitted thinking of meal.

“I liked it.” She fell back on the bed, eyes closed and fingers drumming against her stomach. She was giving him the illusion of privacy so she could remain while he undressed. “Tell me about your evening.”

*****

It seemed Lecter owed Conan O’Brien a favour for redacting his opportunity to host the dinner and so on that Thursday Will found himself on a small unmarked plane serving as Air Force One, flying to film an interview for the Conan show. Will had only been to California twice, and never to the Burbank film studios, which seemed so surreal as they were whisked through narrow hallways to a green room that reminded Will of the cheap motel rooms he used to live in as a child. Hideous shag carpet, another IKEA couch, large mirror on the wall, and kitschy art on the overly bright walls—it was an assault on the eyes after spending so much time in the mellow and subtle White House.

There was a makeup and hair station to the left of the door and the President was sitting in the swivel stool in front the large mirror and ring light, texting on his personal phone as the hair stylist misted something into his hair, patting stray strands into place.

“Hardly have to do anything to this face,” the makeup assistant joked, dusting some sort of powder on Lecter’s face that really didn’t do anything from what Will could see.

“You flatter me,” the President replied and while he was looking at the screen of his phone, Will could tell he was truly enjoying the attention.

There was a knock on the door and Price opened it to reveal the show’s producer. “Hi, can I get you guys anything?”
Lecter looked to him momentarily before returning his attention to his phone and Will took it as a sign he was supposed to speak for the President. “No, thanks.”

The woman smiled, as though hosting Secret Service agents and the leader of the country was just a regular part of her job. “Kay, let me know if I can.”

She closed the door behind her and Will returned his attention back to the Blackberry, his fingers slowly typing out a message to Alana. The makeup assistant and hair stylist both left after shaking Lecter’s hand and Will considered how to ask Alana to have dinner with him in a way that didn’t sound desperate; he hardly saw her despite working just around the corner from her. Though maybe he should consider just asking her to share lunch with him in the cafeteria? Or they could always get a lesser assistant to pick up something for them at a local restaurant.

The President finished preening in the mirror and swiveled his heels around so that he was facing Will. “Will?”

Will glanced up from his Blackberry, then back at the text. “You look fine.”

“I wanted the lint roller.” Will glanced up to see a small smile on Lecter’s lips.

“Oh, right.” Will felt his face get red and ignored the sniggering of the agents as he brought a new lint roller to the President.

“Thank you, Will.”

Will retreated to a corner of the room, angrily deleting everything he’d written, relieved he hadn’t sent it. Alana didn’t want to have dinner with him and he needed to accept it. He pushed himself into his own little world for another five minutes before the President was called out of the green room to be ushered out to the main stage with Zeller and two other agents, leaving him alone with Price, Beverly, and three other members of Lecter’s entourage. Will thought it would be tacky to wish him good luck, so he settled for an awkward nod and smile, which the President returned before leaving, handing his phone over. Will sighed and slumped against the wall, sending off a quick text to Abigail (your dad is going onto the set now) and one to Jack (HL wants Turkish for lunch w/ Clintons on Sat) before the door opened once more; the same producer who’d been in a few minutes earlier had brought in a large cardboard box and two huge neon green gift bags.

“Hi, again. I brought show swag for everyone,” she said cheerfully to him. While it wasn’t unusual for the President to be given things while out of the White House, they were usually smaller items like books and the occasional mug. She handed over the two large, bright green gift bags to him, the white tissue paper rustling loudly. “Here’s for the President, and this bag’s for Abigail (your dad is going onto the set now) and one to Jack (HL wants Turkish for lunch w/ Clintons on Sat) before the door opened once more; the same producer who’d been in a few minutes earlier had brought in a large cardboard box and two huge neon green gift bags.

“Hi, again. I brought show swag for everyone,” she said cheerfully to him. While it wasn’t unusual for the President to be given things while out of the White House, they were usually smaller items like books and the occasional mug. She handed over the two large, bright green gift bags to him, the white tissue paper rustling loudly. “Here’s for the President, and this bag’s for Abigail. Everyone else can grab whatever size shirt they want, and there’s keychains, and I think a few koozies, and some DVDs from the Legally Prohibited Tour, and…pens. You know, just stuff. Take what you want.”

“Thanks,” he repeated as she set down the cardboard box onto the refreshment table.

She handed over a television remote that had been velcro’d to the wall by the light switches. “If you want to watch the President, just turn up the tv on the wall. It only shows the stage, so don’t worry about finding the right channel.”

“Got it.”

“Great, let me know if you need anything else!” As she bustled out of the room, Will realised that he didn’t even know her name and there was no doubt the President would want to know it so he could personally thank her in the inevitable ‘thank you’ card that the White House would send to the
He sighed, making a mental note to find out before they left in thirty minutes.

Price was first to dig into the box of logo embossed paraphernalia. “I think the wife would want a medium…and definitely one of the DVDs.”

“Koozie for me, shirt for me.” Beverly looked up at him. “Will, what size do you want?”

He shook his head, tucking his arms across his chest. “I don’t want one.”

“Sure? Free shirt…”

“I’m sure.” He looked over the quickly dwindling stack. “Oh, but Abigail…”

“There’s probably one for her in the bag.” Price pointed out and Will nodded, setting the two gift bags to the side and turning on the television so that he could focus on anything but the agents pillaging the loot they’d been offered.

Settling onto the armrest of the couch, he studied the President who had just been introduced on stage. Naturally, there was a grand entrance and the show’s band playing a jazzed up version of ‘Hail to the Chief’ as he walked across the polished floor; he waved to pacify the audience, whom were whistling and cheering, and then he shook hands with O’Brien, allowing himself to be led to an armchair positioned beside the host’s desk.

“Hello, Mr O’Brien,” Lecter greeted politely once the fanfare died down.

“Mr President, we’ve talked about this—you can call me Conan. We’re cool.”

The audience responded with a cheer and the President smiled. “As you wish, Conan.”

“So, how are you? How’s Abigail?”

Will felt his gut tighten. ‘My assistant and I helped her dispose of a body on my cousin’s property. How are you?’

“She is well, as am I. And yourself?”

“I’m pretty good. Still got a job.” The man waved a hand out over the stage.

“Keep an eye out for Leno,” Lecter said in absolutely deadpan manner, causing the audience to laugh.

The host nodded enthusiastically. “I was worried when the White House called me up to cancel my gig hosting the dinner, that Leno’d got the job, too.”

The audience laughed again and the President assured, “I would never do that to you.”

“Promise?”

Hannibal gave a nod as the audience laughed again. “I promise.”

*****

Will was always conscious of eyes on him and especially since the events at Boring House, it was something that nagged at him. But this particular Monday, everyone he walked past on the way to the second floor of the Residence was definitely paying attention to him. Looks of amusement, people trying not to get caught staring. Will tried to fight away the shiver down his spine and hurried
through the security checkpoints. If it was related to the death of the young man Abigail had accidentally killed, then he would have been detained already, so he knew that people were watching for some other reason. Abigail met him at the final checkpoint with Barney and as they walked to the elevator, he asked in a low tone,

"Am I imagining that people are staring at me?"

Abigail shook her head. “It was the SNL skit over the weekend. They had Justin Timberlake dressed up as you. They made you look grouchy and crazy.”

His lips curled into a grim smile. “Ah. So they made me look like me.”

"It didn't look like you,” she promised.

Will was accustomed to being the butt of others’ jokes, which made him curious so he wasn’t really concerned for his own ego. “Did they make fun of you?”

She shrugged. “It wasn't as bad as last October. They just made me look like a stupid teenager.”

"I bet your dad is furious.” It didn’t take much for his empathy to ignite a defensive reaction within him.

She smiled and brought a finger to her lips. "It's a secret."

Within the kitchen was Hannibal mixing a bowl of what could only be assumed to be batter as there was a ridiculously expensive waffle iron on the counter by the stainless steel container that held the various stainless steel cooking utensils. Coffee was waiting for him and Will gave an audible sigh at the sight of his morning’s first caffeine boost.

“Good morning, Will. I hope you are in the mood for waffles.”

"That would be great,” he admitted, spotting a small glass pinch bowl with flecks of chocolate in it. “How are you?”

"Well. And yourself?”

Will stirred the coffee, watching the steam rise. “Better.”

"Better?" 

"It's been an awkward morning,” Will confessed, thankful to be away from prying eyes. "But how are you?" 

He winced at his realisation that he’d already asked that question and at the way Hannibal smiled. "I'm still well. Though 'better' now that you are here."

Will blinked, not pleased that he was being mocked, but definitely feeling as though the edge was coming off the information that people were looking at him but couldn’t actually see his secrets. As he sipped his coffee, inhaling the decadent aroma from the waffle iron, he started to relax and listened to Abigail talk about the soup kitchen she’d be visiting later that afternoon to work at. The President made brief eye contact with him as he added the chocolate bits to the waffles that were most definitely going to be his, and Will knew it was silly, but the thought of getting a comforting breakfast was enough to cause the knot in his stomach to loosen. He offered small comments to Abigail’s passionate disquisition on feeding those in need, the world outside the kitchen slipping
away. No, they were all normal in this room.

‘Fuck SNL,’ he thought to himself contentedly. ‘They don’t know anything about us.’

*****

Abigail walks into the kitchen, smelling the thick grease the scrambled eggs are cooking in and watches her mom pushing the beaten yolks around with a tired looking plastic spatula. The room is familiar, ugly. On the windows are valance curtains in the most distasteful brown and orange print. ‘How tacky,’ she thinks to herself, wondering why she would ever live in a house with window treatments like that. The phone is ringing in a steady, shrill whine and she turns to look at it on the wall, wondering who’s on the other end.

She finally grabs the phone, and answers it. “Hello?”

There is a long pause and a knot in her stomach forms as she waits for the caller to speak. It’s Will. “May I speak to your father? This is the FBI.”

The earpiece begins to whine and crackle with static. Still holding the receiver in her hand she turns to look back at her mom.

“Abigail, you need to get ready for school.”

Abigail looks down at the navy blue wool dress and white cashmere cardigan she’s put on and frowns. “I am ready for school.”

Her mom’s mouth forms a grim line and she gives Abigail a once over. “Those are not school clothes. Those are too nice.”

Garrett Jacob Hobbs turns around from the counter where he’s buttering toast and orders, “Abigail, listen to your mother.”

Wind howls around the kitchen and she takes a step back, wishing she had a knife in her hand, something that could protect her. “Where’s Dad?”

Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ eyes widen. “I’m right here,”

“Where’s my real dad?” she screams and turns around, running out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

The rooms keep multiplying and the phone continues ringing; she throws open a door and find a room full of men wearing hunting clothes. Men who she ate every single day, whose bodies hadn’t been warm in years. They stare at her, red rings around their eyes and bodies smelling like meat.

“Daddy!” she screams, calling out for the only person who can save her.

“Abigail!” he shouts, his voice coming from every angle of the house and she spins around, hearing the sound of Hobbs’ hunting boots pursuing her.

“Abigail!”
“Daddy!”

“Abigail!” Hannibal grabbed his daughter firmly by the shoulders and pulled her into an upright position on the chaise lounge, feeling her gasp as she was roused from the nightmare. “Abigail, you’re awake now. You were having a nigh—”

The bedroom door flew open and the lights were thrown on as two Secret Service agents stormed in, guns drawn as they cleared the room. “Mr President, is everything okay?”

Hannibal wasn’t happy to have actual weapons involved in the matter, hoping that they don’t frighten his child further. “Abigail was having a nightmare. I’m sorry. Everything is all right. You don’t need to have your weapons drawn.”

“I’m sorry,” she choked out, shaking violently. “I was just dreaming.”

The senior of the agents, Agent Bachman, nodded as he holstered his gun. “Just making sure everything’s okay. Sorry to barge in.”

Both agents left, shutting off the lights and closing the door quietly; not long after the election, Hannibal had informed the Secret Service privately that on occasion Abigail would sleep in his room to ward off nightmares; he’d filled his voice with enough sadness and failure that the agents had nodded resolutely, pitying them as he intended them to. Poor broken Abigail. Poor Dr Lecter.

That was a half truth, of course. While Abigail did often seek comfort for the occasional abstract nightmare, they had simply grown accustomed to one another’s presence. He enjoyed knowing where she was at all moments, his god complex appeased, and she enjoyed being around the one person that made her feel powerful. As of late they hadn’t allowed themselves to indulge in the luxury of sleeping together in the same room, though the events at Boring House had definitely been used to their advantage. Tonight was nothing more than the presence of one man her mind refused to purge entirely. Humiliated and fraught, she turned to look at him and he frowned to mimic the signs of a distressed parent. He was upset, but not enough to show anything naturally.

“Come here and tell me what your dreamt of, my love,” he murmured and he led her from the chaise up onto the bed.

She shook and flinched as he sat before her, rubbing her arms. “I was back at…”

Her lips worried between her teeth and he nodded, filling in the silence. “The Hobbs’ house?”

“Yes.”

She hadn’t had a nightmare about her former father since he’d from her as a child. ‘Nicolas Boyles startled repressed anxiety loose because I didn’t properly contain that fear within her,’ he thought to himself, evaluating his past work on her mind, acknowledging that it hadn’t been as sophisticated as if he’d done it now.

“They were cooking breakfast because I was getting ready for school. I could smell the meat cooking in the pan.” Her eyes grew distant for a moment, looking past him. “And—and he killed her in front of me again. He started to walk towards me and she was gurgling because he hadn’t done it right and she wasn’t dying and he still had the knife in his hand.”

He can see the high of the adrenaline has run its course and she will need to sleep soon.

“I was running through the hall and there were too many rooms. I was disoriented and all the men who my dad killed were there. I could smell them.”
“What did they smell like?” he asked, wondering if he’d prompt more fear from her; the scent was intoxicating.

“Meat. They smelt like my mom’s cooking. She used too much grease.” She said it so clinically that he almost smiled. How far her tastes had come from the tired, blue collar kitchen she’d been born to. “I couldn’t get out of the house and you couldn’t get in to save me.”

An irrational chill ran up his spine; he would never want to be in a position where he couldn’t protect her, dream or otherwise.

“You need to sleep. You’re safe now,” he promised.

“Please don’t leave me,” she whimpered softly, sounding ready to cry again.

“I won’t, Abigail. I shall be sleeping right beside you tonight. You will not be alone for a moment.”

He continued to hold her hand and reached back to the head of the bed to retrieve pillows for them. Tucking his own behind her head so that she’d be surrounded by the familiar and reassuring scent of him, he reclined on the bed beside her, allowing her head to roll onto his shoulder, his thumb smoothing away the residual tears on her cheeks. Her breathing began to slow, though contained hiccoughs every so often. Always a man for nostalgia, he recalled times when she’d first come to live with him that she’d cry over the man that had destroyed all sense of normalcy she’d had. She was not apologetic tonight, demanding his attention and he murmured his forgiveness that she had wiped her runny nose on his nightshirt.

His bedroom was warm enough that he didn’t need to share the quilt with her, which would be difficult to explain to an agent, as well. As he shushed her, he entertained the thought of allowing her to drown in her nightmares, leaving her unable to function without him, left to cling to him for the rest of her days. He would enjoy having her constantly by his side, but in many ways it would be a burden in the long run. She was one of the rare instances where he was much more interested in her success than failure, a flower arrangement to which he was constantly adding and subtracting, trying to find the right equation to make her just as he wanted. She was so close to perfection.

He brought her fingertips up to his lips, kissing them gently, then brought his hand to rest over her throat. The skin was warm and his fingertips registered the pulse, counting it. Near normal, he catalogued. He tightened his hold and she began to relax, her breathing now edging towards the pattern of the exhausted. She would sleep soon and he hummed a lullaby to her, safe under his gaze. He also imagined crushing her throat so that she could die in the comfort of his arms. All she’d have to do was ask and he would do it, repercussions be damned.

“Don’t let go,” she mumbled and he hummed in agreement.

No, he couldn’t let go if he wanted to.
On the first of May, Bedelia offered Hannibal something he hadn’t been expecting.

Dinner involved a cut of roast he usually saved for Jack’s presence at the dinner table and a wine as rich and as full as the blood coursing through their veins. Bedelia didn’t even bother feigning interest in his cooking anymore, so he performed for Abigail instead, trusting that she was learning something for her own feasts one day. As he plated the meat, he imagined many years from now that she’d be doing this in a kitchen of her own for him, honouring him as the man who’d made her something more. When he was her age, he used to cook for Bedelia, bringing her pieces of victims he’d found in the city, and he’d considered it honouring her.

But in the recent years, Bedelia had stopped what she considered her ‘enablement of atrocious behaviour’ and resigned herself to dining with he and Abigail once a month, due to a sense of obligation because they were related. She lacked any form of passion in her life—she had no other contentment than watching the world burning around her; lives unraveling, needless suffering—this was all had ever made her happy. Hannibal found it difficult to accommodate her interests in his own life as he was someone who saw beauty in the world. She was so removed from life, a void inside her body; when he was fifteen, he’d dreamt of cutting her open and finding an endless abyss inside, motes of dust and wailing silence. There were still days where he felt that way and would stare deep into her eyes to see what dwelt beyond them only to find nothing. In many ways, Bedelia had been equal to Hannibal, but he could never quite bridge the gap in their connexion; she was a glacier beneath the surface, while he was a pillar of fire. She was fascinating and good for secrets, and he certainly felt a fondness for her that he’d otherwise only reserved for his daughter, but the bond he so desired for his family didn’t exist in her.

Not to mention she was incredibly ungrateful for the meat.

He watched her push the tines of her fork against the side of a delicate arrangement of white asparagus; she was playing games, trying to see how long she could test his patience by not eating the meat on her plate. It seemed more childish than anything they’d ever done together in their youth and while he disapproved of such manners at the dinner table, he saw this as one of the rare battles of will between her and him that he delighted in. Her eyes met his and she gave him the smile drove him absolutely insane—predatory, victorious, benign.

“Jack tells me the Secret Service, the police, and the FBI are no closer to discovering Miriam Lass,” she stated, lifting her wine glass to her lips.

“It’s so sad,” Abigail said with a smile before she brought a piece of the evening’s dinner to her mouth.

Bedelia smiled flatly at her in return. “It truly is.”

“She was quite clever. It’s a shame the White House lost someone so young and so brilliant,” he added before his eyes lowered to look at the cut of roast on his plate.

Bedelia offered a polite nod. “And how is your Will Graham? Is he a worthy addition to the administration?”

“It is a pity he hasn’t been with us from the start,” he admitted.

To anyone else his cousin’s expression hadn’t changed but Hannibal could see the seething
resentment roiling under the surface of her mask. “Yes, well. Clarice didn’t work out as I had intended.”

For a brief moment Hannibal narrowed his eyes the slightest amount—furious that she thought him base enough to be seduced by a woman she’d picked for him. But all signs hinting to his true emotions melted into his placid default expression and he returned his attention to cutting the meat on his plate.

“I’m sorry your efforts were wasted,” he replied neutrally. “Though in the process I have gained a friendship.”

She nodded as though she’d ever felt a desire for a friend. “He challenges you. You spend a lot of time building walls, Hannibal. It’s natural to want to see if someone is clever enough to climb over them.” She brought another small forkful of beet to her mouth and after chewing it thoughtfully, asked, “What do you want him to bring out of you?”

“I am still unsure.”

“Perhaps you desire to complete your familial unit is manifesting itself. You have felt loneliness for such a long time. A broken heart that Abigail mends, but could use assistance in curing.”

Abigail looked incredibly shocked and Hannibal felt the same, staring at his cousin as her incredibly bold assertion continued to ring in his ears. Quickly he focused on taking a drink from the glass of water, processing the best course of action.

“I was unaware you thought of Abigail and I in such terms.” His tone was the definition of apathetic.

Bedelia tilted her head to the side; with her unblinking eyes attempting to bore into him and her delicate lips painted coral, she looked like a porcelain doll which was fine to him as he had often dreamt of watching her crack.

“I’ve seen the way you look at him, Hannibal.”

“How do I look at him?”

“You covet him.”

He was reminded of something he’d once said to her over a decade ago, of something he’d once said to Clarice a few months back. Coveting. Yes, he wanted Will’s companionship and something had been lingering in the back of his mind since their time together had become less hostile. Hadn’t it been speculated that killing stemmed from a psychosexual desire? And wanting Will to join him, to watch him execute and eat—hadn’t he imagined the taste of Will’s sweat after a harvest of organs, his pupils blown wide in something between arousal and exhilaration, that wild smile on his lips. Enjoyment. The desire of closeness between them. Originally he’d suspected it was all due to the younger man’s general discomfort with others in his personal space and the need to be the exception to that rule, but now it did make more sense that it was a need for intimacy with him, that there should be more between them than just an alliance and knowledge between them.

Abigail was different of course—her accompaniment during their killing together was simply for the sake of teaching her; he was the best mentor she could possibly have to hone her craft and in many ways, it had been a bonding activity between the two of them. Why couldn’t he have someone for the other aspect of killing?

How blind Lecters often were to what their hearts wanted.
“Do you want the three of us to become a family, Abigail?” he asked his daughter curiously; his mind filled with whirling possibilities of no longer having just an equal, but a partner.

“You know I’ll never leave you. I…” she lowered her eyes. “If you wanted him, I’d make sure you got him.” Abigail tapped her fork against her plate. Hannibal nearly told her to stop, but he could see she was thinking, trying to formulate a way to convey what she felt. When her eyes met his once more, he knew he’d made the right choice not to rush her along. “With the proper handling and the right clipping, all flowers can be worthy of arrangement. But certain specimens are more befitting than others. I remember how fond you were of the rare orchids Lady Murasaki gifted you when you were named head surgeon to Kick’s.”

He offered her a smile he so rarely showed in the presence of others; he knew she hated the embellished conversation that he participated in with Bedelia. “I remember you cut them all and gave them to me as a bouquet.”

Her cheeks turned pink in embarrassment but she seemed committed to his wants. “And this time we can create the arrangement together.”

Hannibal studied his daughter’s eyes; the average person might have squirmed under his unblinking gaze, but she had no other instinct but to stare back. Satisfied she wasn’t going to back down from this new change in plans, he moved his attention back to his cousin. He wasn’t pleased that she would dare to manipulate him, especially with a price so weak as flesh, but if he could use her as means to obtain Will, so be it. He didn’t need her as obstacle.

Raising his glass of wine, watching the way the light from the candles on the table made the contents look like liquid garnet, Hannibal offered the closest action to surrender he had within him. “We should toast to Will’s good fortune. It’s not every day that we get people who wish to love us.”

His daughter beamed as she joined in the toast. “To Will’s new family.”

Bedelia raised her glass and continued to ignore the meat on her plate; her natural smile spoke volumes of her satisfaction. “To plans that come together.”
Chapter Twelve

Will was often left feeling the nagging ache of loneliness that tinted everything in his world, helpless to the conflicting emotions of selfish desire for more and the want to be completely away from everyone and everything forever.

And then something suddenly changed.
Chapter Thirteen

Air Force One made an easy descent into Rome’s Caimpino Airport, the weather unbelievably clear and pleasant for the second week of May. The visit to Italy and Vatican City was literally a drop-down-take-back-off affair; everyone had slept aboard the plane when they left America yesterday afternoon and were landing at nearly eight in the morning, with every intention of leaving the same day. First they’d be visiting the newly elected Pope Francis after which the President would be then traveling south on a nearly five hour drive to meet with the mayor and dignitaries of his maternal grandparents’ hometown of Amalfi, where the First Family would visit the Amalfi Cathedral in Piazza del Duomo, then assist in the dedication of fountain in one of the older neighbourhoods while having his photo taken. Then they’d return north to Naples where Air Force One would have rerouted itself and landed at Naples International Airport; they’d leave for America immediately, afterwards.

“Have you ever been to Italy, Will?” Hannibal asked as Will looked out the window; they were sitting alone in the President’s office aboard the plane.

Will had never been able to bring himself to leave his dogs for longer than twenty-fours and before that he’d always been too poor. “No, I’m afraid I haven’t.”

“Pity we couldn’t enjoy our stay. I could give you a tour of Venice.”

Will turned his attention away from the very intent eyes of the President.

“Perhaps another time,” Lecter suggested.

Will didn’t care about Venice and stood from his seat. “I should probably change.”

The meeting with the Pope was scheduled in forty-five minutes, which by traveling standards wasn’t much time for preparation. Will hadn’t bothered to change upon waking up an hour ago, instead taking the opportunity to retreat into the President’s office to get away from the noisy card game that the press cabin had engaged in. Lecter had given him coffee and easy conversation as they sat next to the small windows.

At least the President’s private bathroom aboard Air Force One was a bit more spacious than the average airplane lavatory; a garment bag containing his formal clothing had been stored on a hook on the back of the door and Will stripped out of what he’d travelled in. Out of the garment bag he pulled out his ‘Sunday best’—a second suit jacket that he’d purchased specifically for traveling abroad, a white dress shirt that his trouser that were least likely to wrinkle, and another of Hannibal’s ties (pale mauve). Dressing quickly, he looked himself over in the mirror, making a face at his appearance. His travel toothbrush was at the bottom of the garment bag and after cleaning his mouth out, he splashed some water on his face.

All of this would have been easier accomplished before he’d gotten dressed, but Will’s mind was on other matters, such as all the silly little things he needed to carry around for Lecter. He’d been entrusted with the Vice President’s bible to be blessed by the Pope and he hated having that responsibility; he could already feel himself fucking that up. He brushed his hair as best he could with his hands, feeling like a complete idiot for not thinking to bring his own comb; wetting his fingers under the faucet, he created a side part and wrangled his hair into something that looked a little less tousled from sleeping on the plane.

“May I fix your tie, Will?” Lecter asked when Will emerged from the bathroom.
“I couldn’t get the knot right,” he admitted.

“It just requires practice.” Lecter smiled at him and stepped forward. As he retied the mauve silk, he told him, “As you are not Catholic, you may greet the Pope by shaking his hand.”

Will hadn’t expected to actually meet the Pope himself. “Is he interested in greeting me?”

“Of course. You are just another of God’s children in his eyes.” Lecter stepped back and nodded.

Will turned and caught his reflection in the glass of the framed map of the United States behind the President’s desk. Lecter had tied it in the same wide-knotted fashion he wore for himself and Will wondered for a moment if it looked strange on him; he settled on it looking ‘assertive’ and ‘dressy’.

“You must permit me to buy you some ties, Will. This borrowing simply will not do,” Lecter told him, and for a moment Will felt like the fucking poor kid at school again.

He knew the President was joking, was teasing him, but he didn’t like to be reminded that he was always going to live under the fear of never having enough money. At the moment he wasn’t hard pressed for cash, but medical bills and old student loans took up anything he might use for leisure. And he hated the implication that he might look like he didn’t belong; it was one few sore spots that took almost no pressure to exploit. He turned away and muttered an excuse about collecting his things, leaving the President by himself in the office.

It was one of the rare occasions that Will didn’t ride in the same vehicle as the President and even though he understood why he was riding in the car in front (“You’ll be there waiting when he gets out,” Jack had explained), he couldn’t help but feel slighted and unhappy to ride along with aides; even if he was still peeved at the President’s offer regarding ties, at least he wouldn’t be forced into a conversation or get uneasy looks. The only redeeming aspect of the drive to the Vatican guest house was that his agent for the morning happened to be Beverly Katz.

“Pretty, huh?” Beverly said as they looked out the windows at the passing city.

People had lined the streets, waving at the cars and taking pictures; Will tried not to get lost in the data his eyes collected on them—majority middle class, early forties to early sixties, predominantly Catholic, majority happy with a half Italian and Roman Catholic American president—and put his attention to the bag he was carrying with him. He knew the President would want a cinnamon breath mint before he met with the Pope, even if he had just brushed his teeth aboard the plane; the ever present lint roller was at the front of the bag and nestled next to the Vice President’s bible, which he’d be passing off to Abigail to hold.

They were headed to the Vatican guest house as Pope Francis didn’t live in the Apostolic Palace, and as they pulled in front of the ‘humbler’ building, Will was left wondering what the actual Apostolic Palace looked like. The Vatican’s house was a rather plain looking building—simple architecture, but over all underwhelming; while the new Pope was a considerably different man than the others that had come before him, Will had expected a little more splendor. Honestly, he was a little disappointed, but didn’t voice that. As he stood in front of the building, waiting for the President and Abigail to exit, he was scanned over by Swiss guards and he flashed his badge to show that no, they were not welcome to check the President’s bag. He was frisked and had a metal detector waved over him a second time before he was cleared and a second badge was attached to the front of his suit; his face was on this badge, too, and he caught Beverly grinning at it. He looked away in annoyance and put on his glasses.

Pope Francis, the 266th Pope, had been elected to the Papacy two days before Jack had come to Will asking for his presence in the White House. The Lecter family three generations previous to
Hannibal had been granted the title of ‘Count’ and ‘Countess’ by the Papal See for their devotion to the church. Abigail herself stood to inherit the title of Countess upon her eighteenth birthday, considered a shining example in her charity work. As Will watched her emerge from the Presidential limo, her hair hidden beneath a plum-coloured lace mantilla and dressed in a conservative lavender skirt suit, he wondered if she felt guilt that she was carrying on a legacy that she didn’t believe in. But politics were full of sacrifices and if it meant she had to keep up a charade in order to keep her dad’s public image intact, there was no doubt in his mind that she would.

She smiled at him, giving a small wave, and he couldn’t help but return the gesture; no, he shouldn’t think of her as helpless in this decision. She was old enough to choose how the public saw her.

Within the guest house’s receiving room—after the breath mints and quick lint roller touch up—everyone waited anxious for the Pope to arrive; Will was one of the two aides to be allowed into the room and stood in a receiving line after Abigail to be greeted by the Pontiff. Pope Francis hailed originally from Argentina and unlike previous popes, spoke fluent Spanish and Italian, his English admittedly shaky; of course, Hannibal was no average president either and spoke seven tongues fluently, Spanish being one of them. It had been determined three days before that the meeting would be held in the language the Pope felt most comfortable with and when Hannibal greeted him, dipping his head to kiss the papal ring (Jack didn’t want that at all—“The Republicans and far right are going to complain that you’re giving our sovereignty to another leader.”), he greeted the religious leader in Castilian so elegant, it sounded as though Lecter had spoke it his entire life.

Abigail kissed his ring and spoke to him in fluent Spanish; the two held a brief conversation, the pope holding her hands the entire time. They parted smiling and she went to sit down on a small chaise behind them. When it came to Will, Lecter made the introductions, telling Will that he’d translate anything he wanted to say. Will felt put on the spot and was relieved that he’d put on his glasses.

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” he said quietly.

Lecter turned to the Pope and spoke, Will’s eyes darting over to him momentarily; when the Pope replied, it was directly to Will, Lecter translating once he’d finished asking his question. “He says it is nice to meet you as well and would like to know how you are.”

“I’m good and yourself?” Will was appalled at how pedestrian he sounded and hoped it translated better though the President.

“He says he is well and would like to know what you think of Italy.” Lecter’s smile was encouraging, so Will took the opportunity to speak with more confidence.

“It’s my first time here, but it’s beautiful.”

Will didn’t have to know Spanish to anticipate the response and Lecter’s translation didn’t surprise him in the slightest. “He’s glad you think so and he hopes you enjoy your stay here.”

“Gracias,” Will thanked, knowing his accent sounded horrible compared to the First Family’s.

The Pope smiled at him and after letting go of his hand, moved onwards to Jack. Will exhaled and went to join Abigail on the small chaise in front of the massive oil pointing of the Virgin Mary.

The entire conference was held in Spanish, Hannibal’s elegant Castilian sounding more like a song than simple speaking. Will wished he understood what was being said and was doing his best to sit still because he wasn’t fucking seven years old in a strange church, but his mind kept thinking of bodies at the bottom of the lake in Maryland, wondering if any of the aquatic life had decided to
consume the flesh or if the warming water was allowing it to decompose on its own. He was betting on small fish and insects picking away at Boyle, nature removing the crime slowly but surely.

Abigail sat beside Will, her eyes distant as her fingers counted her rosary; Will wondered what she thought of in times such as these, if she was thinking about Boyle, too. His eyes had lingered on her too long and she turned to look up at him; she gave a questioning glance and he turned his attention back to his knees. She nudged him with her elbow and he stared back at her; she leaned in and whispered in his ear,

“I can translate it, you know. You just have to ask.”

“Wouldn’t that be rude while they’re talking?” he whispered back.

She shook her head and without further prompting, began to explain what was being said. The mystery of what was happening began to evaporate and Will hung on her every word eagerly, catching Lecter’s eyes only once.

*****

Will seemed captivated by the depth of the blue of the Tyrrhenian Sea off the Amalfi Coast. The motorcade was navigating cliff-face roads through a sleepy town surrounded by uniformed rows of lemon trees. Hannibal watched him with interest, well aware that the man had a certain interest in the ocean, all latent issues directly tied to his late father. They were headed to Hannibal’s maternal grandparents hometown of Amalfi for a ceremony to dedicate a fountain in one of the quaint housing districts. The gesture was kind of the town, but absolutely ridiculous. However, Hannibal had an image to uphold and his reaching out to the Italian heritage he’d claimed while campaigning the year before couldn’t be forgotten so easily; it would make for a nice photo op for the traveling press corp and give him an opportunity to show Will the beauty of one of his favourite countries.

Had this been a vacation with Abigail, they’d be riding in a rented convertible so that they could bask in the sun and breathe in the scent of the lemon orchards. Instead, he was stuck in a vehicle that had its own contained air system and he couldn’t roll down the windows. He hated the smell of the recycled air—Katz cheap perfume and Price’s deodorant were overwhelming the smell of his own aftershave, Abigail’s shampoo, and Will’s generic laundry detergent.

Hannibal leaned towards Price. “I would like to have the motorcade stop so that we might enjoy the air for a few minutes before we are bombarded with cameras.”

Price, a man who enjoyed the outdoors, was naturally sympathetic to the plight of being stuck in a vehicle for a few hours. He quickly spoke into the microphone on his wrist and being the senior agent to his detail, was able to have his wish granted. The motorcade began to slow down and pull over to the side of the road, prompting Will and Abigail to glance over at him for an explanation.

“Shall we stretch our legs?” he asked.

Will seemed hesitant. “Seriously?”

He nodded, unbuckling his seatbelt. “We can spare a few minutes.”

They disembarked, Will stretching his back with a loud pop, while Abigail tipped her head towards the lemon trees, a silent request to get closer to them. Hannibal gave the barest of nods.

“What’s going on?” Jack asked as he clamboured out of the vehicle behind theirs.

“We’re stretching our legs,” Hannibal said simply.
He nodded and leaned against the car, lighting up a cigarette. Hannibal had noticed that more frequently his Chief of Staff had been sneaking off to smoke when he knew his wife wouldn’t catch him; Bella Crawford still hadn’t disclosed her illness to him and there was no doubt her distant behaviour to him was weighing on his mind. Hannibal wondered when Jack would learn the truth and come after him for not saying anything—he eagerly awaited whatever miserable tirade the other man would lay against him.

They walked into the trees leisurely, the multiple Secret Service agents spreading out cautiously among the rows; Will came to walk one step behind him as he’d become accustomed to and Abigail drifted amongst the low branches, her hands trailing along the weatherworn bark.

“Have you ever tasted an Amalfi Coast lemon, Will?” Hannibal asked.

“I doubt it. No.”

“In the 19th century, they were regarded as a sign of prestige due to the price they were sold at. The rind smells sweet and the meat is pleasantly tart, not as sour as the lemons we are used to back in the States.” He pulled the branch down to bring an attractive lemon closer to them; scratching a finger against the rind, he ordered, “Smell.”

Will leaned in obediently, inhaling the aromatic oils that had been released.

“Alas, picking one would be such a crime,” Hannibal admitted, wishing greedily to pluck it anyway.

Abigail leaned against one of the tree, watching them curiously. Encouraged by his audience, Hannibal motioned for Will to look at the Tyrrhenian Sea.

“A perfect combination, isn’t it? The salt of the ocean and the citrus of this grove?”

He smiled slightly, eyes looking at him over the frames of his glasses. “It is.”

Hannibal heard the footsteps coming down from the slope of the orchard and a grey haired man came walking down the rows looking at them curiously, probably suspecting them to be tourists. He was dressed for outdoor work, but he wasn’t sweating, indicating to Hannibal that he was most likely the head of the orchard, possibly the owner, possibly the field manager. The Secret Service placed their hands on their still holstered weapons, now in a state of hyper vigilance, but Hannibal raised a hand, wanting them to stand down.

“Hello!” the man greeted in Italian.

Hannibal’s lips formed an amicable smile as he stepped forward. “Hello! We were marveling at your beautiful lemons.”

“Yes, our crop is turning out well, this year. I’m Rinaldo Pazzi—” he introduced himself and Hannibal’s eyes dilated a fraction at the name as the man’s own face lit up at the realisation of who he was. “You’re the American President! I knew you looked familiar!” He was grinning broadly, smelling of cheap cigarettes. “Please, take some lemons! Allegra! Come bring a bag!”

“Pazzi,” he heard Abigail murmur reverently, ignored by everyone else as Secret Service shifted uncomfortably—not all of them spoke Italian, but there was no doubt that they understood he was beckoning another person.

“We couldn’t. I have no money on me,” he insisted politely, even though he knew he would in fact be leaving with the beautiful citrus he coveted. His mind was already considering recipes—crumbled brains in lemon butter was at the top of the list.
Pazzi was plucking the nicest looking lemons off the tree in a hurried manner. “I insist! We would be honoured to have the American President eating our lemons.”

The agents rested their hands against their sides as a lovely and much younger woman came into sight, walking down from the slope of the hill. She held a burlap sack in her gloved hands and her hair was tied back loose and informal.

“Rinaldo, what are you yelling for?” she called out, before her eyes opened wider at the sight of the people in the orchard.

“The American President is here and I want him to take some of the lemons,” Rinaldo explained, before turning his attention back to him. “President Lecter, this is my wife, Allegra.”

“Hello.” She pulled off her heavy gloves and offered him a slightly calloused hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Signora Pazzi.” He kissed the back of her hand, covertly stealing the scent of her delicate skin. “We were so taken with the beauty of your trees we had to stop. Though it would seem the beauty this orchard harbours does not stop at the trees.”

She gave a throaty chuckle and Pazzi gave her a hungry look as he continued picking the lemons and stuffing them in the bag.

Price stepped forward and quietly said, “Mr President, we should probably cut this quick.”

“Would you mind if we took a photo with you? No one would believe us,” Signora Pazzi asked, pulling a length of cord out of the back pocket of her jeans, tying the bag of lemons up and offering it to him.

“It would be my pleasure;” he insisted, Abigail hurrying over to take the bag from his hands.

The woman pulled a phone out of her back pocket, handing it over to Will and pointed to a small button on the screen. “This one,” she instructed Will with a heavily accented voice.

Will dutifully did as he was told, taking three pictures before returning the phone.

“I’m afraid we must leave,” Hannibal apologised.

“You are welcome back at anytime!” Pazzi insisted as he shook hands with them one last time and Secret Service led them back to the motorcade.

“Pazzi,” Abigail hissed at him as she skipped back to the Cadillac, her eyes wild and her smile excited.

He nodded in agreement, taking her hand as he helped her back into the limo; perhaps one day they would return and Abigail could claim a Pazzi of her own. But for now, his attention was on other things, specifically the man accompanying them in the motorcade. Once they were settled and seated, the long procession of cars pulled back onto the road, the bag of lemons at Abigail’s feet. Hannibal gestured to her to untie the bag and she complied, handing over one of the citrus fruits.

“Will, my knife,” he requested.

Will was the only non-Secret Service Agent to have a ‘weapon’, a small bladed pocket knife that stayed in the President’s essentials bag. He handed it over and Hannibal carefully sliced into the thick skin, the aroma of citrus completely filling the car. It was simultaneously heady and gentle, the perfect combination with Will’s warm skin. Abigail was served first, a slice handed to her on his
handkerchief, then one offered to Will.

The younger man was hesitant as always with everything new things, but as expected, didn’t deny himself the opportunity to try it. “It’s not sour at all.”

“Just the hint of a bite,” he agreed, watching as Will’s tongue darted out to lick the juice remaining on his bottom lip. “Are you glad we stopped?”

Will didn’t reply, but chuckled, enough to indicate that he was secretly pleased with the sequence of events.

“Thank you, Dad.” Abigail’s eyes flicked over to Will, seeing if he’d follow suit.

Hannibal played along. “You are welcome, Abigail.”

The younger man nodded in his direction. “Thanks.”

He nearly corrected Will, but thought better of it. He could still enjoy the moment with the informal appreciation. “You are welcome, Will.”

Hannibal proceeded to offer the agents traveling with them slices of the lemon. Price refused on grounds of ‘the Clean diet’, while Barney happily tried out the fruit; satisfied his passengers were taken care of, he indulged in the sun warmed fruit. Will was still unsophisticated enough that he didn’t stop and properly savour food, though Hannibal could forgive the urgency to consume. Without prompting, he fed Will a second piece. Will always accepted the food he was offered without hesitation.

Before his stare could be considered inappropriate, he turned to Abigail, who was staring at him in turn. Her smile was impish and she returned her attention back out the window staring off at the ocean just as Will did. She was still so impressionable and he wondered what of Will would cling to her.

That night as they flew back on the plane, he watched Will sleep. The lights in the cabin had been dimmed and Hannibal took the opportunity to simply be close. Quietly, he seated himself beside the sleeping man, watching him for indication of being disturbed from his REM cycles. Confident that Will wasn’t going to wake from his presence, he carefully removed the younger man’s glasses and folded them, tucking them neatly into the breast pocket of Will’s shirt.

He leaned in close and inhaled softly; almost nothing was left of the glorious illness that had attempted to lay claim to the young man’s mind, instead leaving a lingering chemical scent of medicines. It would have been exhilarating to see him under the throes of madness, and while the opportunity to experience it had all but disappeared, there were other aspects of it he could enjoy, he’d just have to find them.

Still beside Will, he located his iPad and went to the bookmarked website he frequented obsessively. Tattle-Politics didn’t disappoint and while he wasn’t the newest article feature, Freddie Lounds had already found the impromptu photo of himself with the Pazzis amid the lemon trees and had dedicated an update regarding his trip to Italy; it wasn’t an exciting post in the slightest, but it amused him. He located Allegra Pazzi’s twitter account and bookmarked that for later surveillance, then returned to Tattle-Politics to read the comments section. Various readers had left opinions of irritation that he was ‘vacationing when he should be running the country’ and that he should ‘come visit California, our lemons r better!’

He smirked, saving the photo to the iPad as Will had taken it, and settled back in the seat, allowing
himself the opportunity simply enjoy the closeness to the younger man here in the dark.

*****

Abigail sometimes dreamt of Marissa lying naked and cold on the forest floor. Her brilliant blue eyes were cloudy and saw nothing, which seemed so beautiful to Abigail as she looked into them. The forest was lit by stars that tried to peek through barren branches, bark sooty and rough. Abigail exhaled thunderstorms that crackled and burst as she’d straddle Marissa’s stomach and twist her hands into that dark, damp hair as she’d pull her friend’s head up to hers. She would bring Marissa’s lips to hers, tasting the last sweet smear of thirty dollar lipgloss, pulling the final small breath from her lungs. She’d hungrily eat at Marissa’s tongue, devouring every soft morsel, crushing it between molars and swallowing it with bloody saliva. A breeze would tease the back of her neck and she’d be drunk on the last warmth curling out of her friend’s body.

Marissa’s maw would be left as nothing more than a bloody dark hole and she’d kiss those lips so tenderly as she noted the absence in Marissa’s mouth, filling it with her own. She’d nuzzle Marissa’s face, smearing the blood and spit on her cheeks, praising her for offering up everything she’d ever wanted. And when she’d wake up, sweating and shaking.

This was another such occasion, where she awoke curled up in the presidential sleeping compartment at the back of the Air Force One, alone and hungering. She squirmed beneath the sheets, because she knew these dreams were meant to be nightmares.

And yet they were never ugly.

*****

“Dad’s dealing with Boehner problems,” Abigail announced as Will entered the kitchen the morning following Italy.

He was exhausted and hoped to catch a quick nap in his office if the time permitted; granted, going overseas had been a much more enjoyable experience than he’d anticipated, but he needed coffee badly and was fairly disappointed that Lecter wasn’t in the kitchen with a cup waiting for him—he hadn’t realised how accustomed he’d become to that in the morning. Abigail was rummaging in the cupboards for the canister of muesli and while he knew it tasted good, he also saw this as an opportunity to fulfill his unspoken agreement with Lecter to act as her proxy father.

“Want me to make you breakfast?”

“Sure!”

He looked about the kitchen and with a sinking feeling, knew he wasn’t going to be able to make anything terribly exotic or especially impressive.

“I uh, I can make you a fake McMuffin. That's about it,” he apologised.

“I’d love that. Want help?” she offered.

“No, you can sit there and uh, tell me about your schedule for the day.” He gestured to the counter where she sat and did as he suggested.

“Oh, okay. Well, um, the Smithsonian wants my inauguration dress for display in the First Lady’s exhibit.”

“Wow,” he said, genuinely impressed.
Rummaging around in the fridge, he found eggs, sausage links, and cheese and set them out on the counter; he already knew there were English muffins in the pantry as he’d texted the kitchen staff to restock them when he was in Rome yesterday.

“I know, right? I think it’s cool. So we have to go over and present it so they can take pictures,” she told him and as she further explained, he searched though the kitchen’s pots and pans to find something suitable.

‘No non-stick,’ he thought to himself with some annoyance. Finally settling on a smaller pan, Will cut the sausage casings open, reforming the filling into small patties, and then thought to make extra in case Abigail wanted a second or he burned one. Oil was heated in the pan and Abigail cringed as he started to throw the casings away, making the suggestion that instead they be fried in the pan rather than just go to waste, which he supposed was fine. They crisped as he prepared the eggs and toasted the muffins, and as she crunched on them, voices emanated from the Center Hallway and they both turned their attention to the approaching President and the distinctive Jack Crawford.

“Jack, I don’t care about that. I do not golf. Hello, Will,” Lecter greeted as he walked into the kitchen.

Will nodded politely. “Good morning.”

“Watch out for his cooking,” Jack teased and Will glared at him, not noticing Hannibal coming to stand behind him.

“It looks good, Will. Shall the three of us dine on the terrace this morning?” the President asked.

“If you want to.”

The warm presence at his shoulder disappeared and Will exhaled heavily, blinking and fidgeting as he focused on the eggs frying in the grease of the sausage.

“Jack, I’ll be eating breakfast now. We can continue the conversation later,” Lecter said in an attempt at dismissal.

Jack, however didn’t seem to want to take no for an answer. “Just think about it, Hannibal.”

“I already have and I will not golf with him. If he needs to talk with me, we shall use the Cabinet Room.” This time, Lecter’s voice was firm, clearly establishing that the discussion was over. “And now I shall have breakfast.”

Jack left, agitated and Will smirked slightly at the food—Jack tried to establish himself as the dominant male everywhere he went and nothing was more gratifying than knowing that he’d been knocked down a peg; Will realised he was feeling the President’s reaction as his own. It wasn’t bad.

“I shall get the plates,” Lecter announced.

Hannibal's hand rest on the small of his back as he reached behind him for the plates and Will knew his face was burning at the close contact. He didn't dare look back up at Abigail. 'He’s making sure I know where he is in the kitchen,’ Will told himself, trying to justify the contact.

“What are we going to drink?” the President asked, and Will thought the plates being set onto the counter were a loud as gunshots.
Wills mouth was dry and he couldn't coherently think of an answer for the question.

“Just orange pressée for me, please,” Abigail requested politely, opening up a folded copy of the New York Times.

“And you, Will?” Lecter’s hand finally pulled back as he moved about the kitchen.

“Coffee. Please.” He kept his eyes glued to the eggs.

“I’ll start the press.”

Will didn’t notice the Lecters exchanging wolfish smiles.
A two days after Will cooked breakfast, Hannibal knocked politely on the doorframe of his office; the door had been left open a few inches, welcome invitation for him, but a deterrent for others. Through the space he could see the younger man and made temporary eye contact.

Will looked away, but he didn’t have the crease between brows. “Come in.”

Holding the treasured files in one hand, he looked to the leather armchair closest to the desk. “May I sit down, Will?”

“Please.” Will’s hand quickly flew to the desktop and grabbed at a small dish that had been filled with wrapped candy, offering it out. “Uh, peppermint?”

“No, thank you.” Hannibal’s hand tapped against the top of the files, unable to contain his enthusiasm. “I have been considering how you view the world. I would like to see what you see.”

His assistant’s expression became uncertain. “I…wouldn’t want to drag you into my world.”

“But if I found myself there, I would appreciate the company,” Hannibal insisted.

Will gave him an awkward smile, holding the embarrassment and shame from a troubled life. Still doubtful of their friendship, still holding back. Hannibal offered out the files. “I have brought you something. The other files to the Chesapeake Ripper’s victims. If you were interested in looking at them.”

Will’s hand was already reaching out for them. “Is…I mean, am I even allowed to look at these?”

“Yes.” The legality was actually murky at best, but he was sure that if it ever came to light that he’d allowed Will to look at the files, he’d be able to explain the matter away.

“Did someone tell you about my time in high school?”

“That you used to attempt to help the police? It was mentioned to me.”

Will flipped through the files. “I’m not a detective.”

Hannibal couldn’t picture that. “I know.”

“I’ll…give it a look over.” The younger man glanced up to him. “Who do you think did it?”

“I don’t want my own opinions to influence yours.”

Will nodded and shrugged. “Oh, you included the Miriam Lass and Clarice Starling files.”

“Do they not interest you?” He’d debated whether or not to include their files as he didn’t want to imply too greatly that everything was intertwined. That was for Will to discover.

Will looked uncomfortable. “Wouldn’t it be a conflict of interest for either of us to investigate them independent of the Secret Service?”
“I am actually permitted to head the investigation however I see fit. You could be my personal consultant.” Hannibal leaned in slightly. “Just the two of us.”

“Playing detective,” Will replied in the tart tone that Hannibal had come to associate with the other man’s sense of humour.

“More interesting than my shirt collar stays,” he added with a smile.

“Infinitely.” Will’s fingers slid along the sides of the files, a single fingertip poised to slip under the first cover and open it. “Should…?”

“You may start when you feel comfortable; today is expected to be a slow day. All I ask is that you inform me when you take the files out of this office.”

Hannibal had no doubt that Will would start reading the files the moment he walked out of the room, forgetting about the list of thank you notes that he was supposed to create for his secretary. It would create extra work for the lower level assistants as a result, but that was what they were there for.

*****

Will had flagged the comparisons between the Lass disappearance and the Starling murder (careful to tuck the crime scene photos into an envelope where he couldn’t see them and wouldn’t be forced to burn them into his mind just yet), little post it notes marking spaces where ideas met and hypothesis began to take root. While his mind could make leaps and bounds easily, strands of information and facts clinging to conclusions, it was next to impossible for others to see how he’d reached his decisions, and by marking the reports, he was making it easier to reference something when Hannibal inevitably asked about his progress.

A knock at his door—only the president knocked that way—caused him to lift his head as he automatically called out, “Come in.”

Hannibal’s eyes lowered to the scattered pages on his desk briefly. “Just the two of us today. Abigail is with Bedelia for my cousin Maria’s charity luncheon in California. Shall we dine in the Residence, Will?”

“Might be nice for a change.” Will quickly began to shuffle the papers back in order.

“Making progress?” the President asked as Will placed the files into the bottom drawer of his desk, locking it.

“Yeah, I was actually looking over Lass’ and Starling’s files, making the connexions.”

“I will be interested to see the end results.”

They lapsed into silence as they left his office and as various people passing paused to greet Hannibal; Once in the First Family’s kitchen, Will sat down at the counter as the President went over to the fridge, removing glass containers.

“So you were at Boring House the night Starling was killed?”

The President turned to look at him. “Are you investigating me, Will?”

“What? No! I’m…I’m just trying to piece everything together. Why they selected that night to attack Lass and Starling. Why they didn’t go after you instead.” He frowned and wished he’d put his glasses on. “Why would I investigate you?”
Lecter smiled and Will realised belatedly that the President had been making a joke. “She was my employee.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to rule you out. You have an alibi.” Will took a breath and asked a question he hoped Hannibal wouldn’t find insulting. “Why did Starling get to lie in honour at the state building?”

To his relief, the other man’s expression didn’t change. “Her father was a sheriff and he was killed while on duty. She once told me that she found his funeral to be unworthy of his service to the community—just a small town law man that was replaced the next day. I thought she deserved the funeral her father never received.”

A candle was lit in a recess of Will’s mind. “You pitied her.”

“In some ways, yes. She had potential. Wasted.” Hannibal paused, tilting his head to the side as though reminiscing. “And I wanted her to be remembered. She had a distinct fear of not being remembered.” He returned his attention to the food. “I’m afraid I merely have leftovers to offer you,” Hannibal said humbly in reply as he took the lids off the glass containers he’d taken from the fridge.

Will had never seen leftovers that looked gourmet before working at the White House. “We could always have the kitchens make us something. Or eat at the cafeteria. You don’t have to go through all this trouble. I, I could pay.”

Hannibal seemed to be fighting a smile. “Perhaps on a later occasion. For now I shall cook.”

Will knew that the other man was patronising him, embarrassment flaring in him. He turned the conversation back to Starling.

“People speculated that you were lovers,” he ventured cautiously.

“Because of the distinction I gave her death.” Lecter selected a pan and set it on the stove top. “She had no family. I felt it was only fair that I took responsibility for the matter.”

“You weren’t?”

“No, Will. Clarice was just my personal assistant.” Hannibal’s stare was intense and his smile held a hint of something more; Will lowered his head and swallowed hard.

“I’m just trying to understand if the motive for killing her was personal to you or to her.”

“You don’t believe that this is a random killing.”

Will shook his head. “No. Not possible.”

“You are sure.” Broth was added to the pan and then the pork loins, covering it all with glass lid.

“Almost. I mean, I can’t know for certain. But when I looked at the photos—she was delicately handled. You don’t handle a stranger that way.”

“She knew the killer,” Hannibal stated.

“Well, the killer definitely knew her.” Will sighed.

“Are you enjoying this, Will?”

Years of fighting an appearance of normalcy had him spitting out an answer far too quickly. “No! No, not at all—”
“I meant the challenge.” It was the only time that Will was aware of Hannibal interrupting him.

“Oh.” Will felt like an idiot. “I don’t know.” He actually had no idea. “It’s so ugly. Seeing these things... I don’t think anyone could do it forever.” He desperately wanted to talk about something else. “Do you ever miss being a doctor? I mean, a practicing one?”

“Occasionally.”

“Why didn’t you return?”

Hannibal lifted the lid to check the meat. “Due to the events that brought Abigail to me, I was put on administrative leave while the investigation was being held. During that time Bedelia spoke to me about the opportunity of joining her in politics. She suggested I might do well with a change in career.”

Will would have loved to see that conversation—the drive to understand and know everything about people and motives was all consuming. The small details would go miles to fill in the blanks of understanding who Hannibal Lecter truly was beyond the carefully marketed facade he helped create. Will always thought it was bad form to talk about the fact that he used to discuss the intricacies of Lecter’s career for a living, but decided it was his turn to contribute something in terms of conversation.

“I used to have a lecture about the choice you made to focus on mental health in your freshman campaign. The, uh, plan to have the state provide better healthcare.”

“It’s an important part of my family’s political interest.” Hannibal turned off the stove top and began to plate the food. “Did you speak much of me in your classes?”

“I wasn’t teaching ‘Lecter 101’, if that’s what you’re asking, but yes. You’ve been unique to recent politics. And you’re popular among the students. Americans like romance. They like the thought of the tragic hero, the stoic survivor rising above it all.”

“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,” he quoted and set the plate down in front of Will.

“Thank you.”

Will managed to wait until the President came around the corner and sat down beside him; Will quickly dug into the food and nodded to Hannibal with a mouthful of pork and stuffing. Lecter’s lips curled into a very pleased smile as he straightened the napkin in his lap. A question nagged at Will and never one to truly keep his thoughts to himself for long, he swallowed his food and turned to the President.

“Does looking at the Chesapeake Ripper case ever bother you?”

“The violence?” Hannibal asked and Will nodded. “I am good at compartmentalising.”

“God, I wish I could say that,” Will admitted as Lecter poured a glass of water for him and then himself.

“You must simply take your mind somewhere else.”

Will kept his tone even. “Easier said than done.”

But Hannibal didn’t seem to think his reason was an excuse. “No one has ever properly taught you
how to do so.”

“Who taught you?”

“I read about it as a child. I explored the concept of creating a memory palace on my own.”

“You taught Abigail?” Will asked curiously, though he was already certain of the answer.

“Naturally.”

Ready footsteps brought their attention to the doorway behind them.

“Hannibal, I—” Sutcliffe’s eyes met his and both men frowned before the Lieutenant Chief of Staff returned his focus to the President. “I found the names you wanted.”

“Thank you.” Hannibal didn’t take the file held out to him. “You may leave them on my desk downstairs.”

“Right.” Sutcliffe’s body language screamed at the irritation of having to be near Will, actively not acknowledging him. “I couldn’t find you in the dining room. Didn’t realise you’d be here.”

The President’s eyes drifted over to him. “Will and I thought it might be nice to have a change in scenery.”

“I’ll get these to your desk,” Sutcliffe said stiffly.

“Thank you, Donald. That will be all,” Hannibal dismissed.

After the other man left the room and Will counted to twenty, he said, “He thinks I’m crazy.”

“Yes,” the President agreed.

“He’s a Republican. Why did you think he’d be a good addition to your administration?”

“While I do not believe in filling a workspace with people one is friendly with, Donald is someone I can trust to follow Jack’s directions and bend to my interests. And he is clever—while we do not agree on political matters, he would rather watch my administration succeed than be on a sinking ship.”

Will was not fond of shady ass-kissers like Sutcliffe and if the two doctors hadn’t known one another for so long, Will would have made the recommendation to dump him—there was no way Sutcliffe would work out well for the President.

“Convenient,” Will finally settled on.

“Potsdam Giants,” Hannibal commented.

“What?”

“King Friedrich Wilhelm the First of Prussia enjoyed the appearance of tall soldiers, so he recruited very tall men to join him.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying that we’re your tall soldiers?”

“I only want the best. And the king never sent his Lange Kerls into battle. He couldn’t bear the thought of sacrificing them.”
The President attempted to exchange a teasing smile, but Will couldn’t keep himself from muttering, “Damaged goods.”

“Is that what you think of yourself?” Will didn’t answer, drinking from his glass instead. Hannibal was quiet, focusing on his food and Will speared a piece of the pork, dragging it through the cherry sauce before the other man asked, “Are you familiar with the Japanese practice of ‘kintsugi’, Will?”

“No,” he admitted, eyes focused on the coffee maker.

“It means ‘golden joinery’; a laqueur resin sprinkled with powdered gold binds the broken pieces of a teacup or bowl together, creating a work of art from something that was previously considered unusable.”

“Looking to patch me up with gold, Dr Lecter?” he asked drily.

Hannibal didn’t answer and Will found some relief in this.

*****

The following morning, Will found the julep cup holding his pens had been replaced by an earthen brown vessel that had a heavy seam of gold running though it. He picked it up in his hands and ran it over in his hands, his thumb smoothing over the gold. It was beautiful, decadent in a natural way—the way a strip of earth might contain a streak of gold. He smiled slightly and placed it back on his desk.

*****

During a meeting in Jack’s office, one of the interns managed to spill not one, but two coffees on the President’s iPad and after Will managed to wipe it down as best he could, Hannibal had asked him, “Would you make sure the files haven’t been corrupted?”

Will had retreated to his office, giving a dark look to the intern as he walked past. It was the President’s media iPad and after an extensive check through various clips of speeches and political appearances, Will happened into the playlist titled ‘Home Movies; he hesitated, unsure if he was welcome to look at the personal films of the President and his family. The first video was titled ‘2001/28/12_First Film’; after a moment of internal conflict, he decided to press play and was immediately shown the inside of a kitchen a younger Hannibal Lecter standing at the granite counter. Judging by the angle at which the camera looked up at him, the one recording would have to be a child and Will knew it could only be Abigail.

“Hi, Daddy!” her little voice chirped.

Lecter looked down and gave a very fond and amused smile to the camera before returning his attention to the plate he is preparing. “Good morning, Abigail. Is that your new video camera?”

“Yep! What are you doing?”

“I am making your breakfast. Look at how happy it is to see you.” He lowered the plate for her to look at and Will was surprised to see atop pancakes a smiling face created with sliced strawberries and sausage links. Abigail giggled and Will smiled.

“Would you like orange pressée or coffee?” he asked as he

“Orange pressée!” she singed happily, her pronunciation surprisingly good for her youth.
Lecter raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? I can pour you a cup of the new French roast right now.”

“Ewwww!” she squealed in protest, the camera shaking and tilting.

Hannibal glanced back to her. “You must turn off the camera now. We’ll play with it later.”

“Okay. How do I—“

The video ended and Will selected the next one on the playlist. Abigail was walking down the steps of who was undoubtedly their home in Baltimore, dressed in a white dress with a white veil pinned neatly to her head; Will found the outfit curious.

“And here’s the princess,” Hannibal announced.

Her face lit up. “Do I look like a princess?”

“You look like I stole you from a castle.”

“Are you excited for your confirmation, Abigail?” Though the speaker was off camera, Will instantly recognised the voice as Vice President Du Maurier’s.

Her outfit suddenly in the proper context, he spotted the small pearl rosary in Abigail’s hand and the crucifix around her neck.

“Yes,” she replied and then the video froze.

Will quickly marked down its name on a sticky note. The next clip was filmed from the edge of a river that was lined with spectator stands and there were rowing boats in the water. The camera focused in on a maroon and white uniformed group of girls sitting in one of the boats. Will instantly spotted Abigail whom was looking around and finally saw her saw her father. Abigail waved to the camera and Hannibal’s hand could be seen slightly off camera waving in return.

“This is Abigail’s first competition as coxswain,” Hannibal explained as though he knew Will would one day watch and want to know what was happening.

There was a shot from a starter pistol after a few minutes of further organisation among the two teams rowing and Will clenched his fists in excitement, wondering if her team would win. They did, crossing the finish line a full second faster than the other team and the stands erupted in cheers, Will exhaling sharply as he smiled. The girls lifted Abigail up and she let out a shriek as she was tossed into the water. She surfaced, laughing and shouting, reaching a hand out for the other girls to pull her out.

Will was still feeling the second glee of Abigail’s team winning when he ventured into the next film. There was a familiar voice—Alana’s—as the camera shook, out of focus and pointed at the floor. “So I just—oh there, it’s on now.”

The camera lifted and trained itself on Hannibal and Abigail who were standing side by side in their kitchen, both wearing aprons and mixing different bowls of thin batter. Abigail was watching Alana hawklike and then her face relaxed.

“I’m helping dad make a cake for tomorrow’s bake sale. We’re making *mille-feuille*. That means…” she paused and then said, “Thousand leaves.”

“Very good, Abigail,” her father praised. “Your French lessons are paying off.”
She leaned against him slightly. “I have a good teacher.”

“Show Alana the truffles, Abigail,” he directed her and Abigail led Alana over to the fridge where there was a tray of small chocolates lined neatly in rows.

“Aren’t they pretty?” Abigail asked, her voice proud.

“Wow, when I had bake sales we had boxed sheet cake,” Alana joked, zooming in on the truffles. “You could sell these professionally.”

“There is no point in baking if we are not giving it our best effort. No excuse for poorly made food.” Will can hear the smile in Hannibal’s voice.

Abigail shuts the fridge door as Alana asked, “And this is going to…?”

“The proceeds are to raise money for the scholarship students who will be studying over the summer.”

“Well, I’m sure this will sell in no time,” Alana complimented.

One video blended into the next, mostly in chronological order—Abigail’s first piano recital, Hannibal smiling down at the camera while he and Abigail stood in front of the Piazza del Duomo, the second gubernatorial election where Jack received the call announcing Hannibal had won, Abigail and Bedelia riding horses, Abigail swimming at the Kennedy Compound’s pool, Hannibal cooking for a dinner party, Hannibal and Abigail dancing together in the backyard with her maroon graduation gown on, Abigail posing proudly with a large buck she’d shot, Hannibal smiling and waving to the camera before returning his attention to the book he was reading…

*****

Will unlocks the door to mock-tudor style house, taking care to lock it behind him afterwards. He has a briefcase in his hand and he sets it on the expensive but tasteful side table by the front door, loosening his tie as he walks through the entranceway to the kitchen. He can hear the pitter-patter of small bare feet on the hard wood floor and a six year old Abigail comes running towards him.

“Daddy, you’re home!”

He lifts her up into his arms, looking at her through his glasses. “Hello, princess,” he greets, kissing her on the cheek. As he looks closer to her neck he sees that it’s a ruby red. “You’re bleeding.”

She drags her fingers through it, bring it up for him to look at. “No, it’s just my paints. Daddy bought me watercolours.”

He frowns, his heart racing. “Oh.”

She licks the thin liquid. “See? It tastes like raspberry.”

Hannibal walks over from the stove, wiping his hands on the apron. “Are you hungry, Will?”

“I’m starving.”

The older man looks down at the little girl. “Abigail, you can’t wear your confirmation dress. You’re going to get blood on it.”

Abigail disappears through the doorway and Will always imagined her taller, older. “She’s so small.”
Hannibal rests his hand on Will’s shoulder. “We are her fathers now.”

Will looks at Hannibal’s eyes and sees that they aren’t too white and that they don’t look sick and that they’re a warm red, like the wine on the counter and Hannibal leans in and kisses Will—

His eyes fluttered open and looked over to see both Hannibal and Jack watching him from the doorway. Jack was smirking and the President was looking at him curiously—Will was certain that if he made eye contact with Hannibal for even a brief second, he’d know what he’d been dreaming about.

“Good, you’re back with us.” Jack couldn’t seem to keep the smirk of his face.

“I fell asleep,” Will said tiredly. He glanced back down at the iPad on the desk whose screen had gone dark.

“Yes, Will.”

“What were we talking about?” Hannibal asked.

“Did I say something?” Will asked, sounding sharper than he intended. God, what if he knew?!

Jack smirked. “No.”

“What were we talking about?” Will mumbled, his tongue feeling thick in his mouth.

“Nothing.” Jack didn’t look so amused anymore. “Hannibal came to ask you about the iPad and when he didn’t return, I came over to see what was going on.”

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep.” Will wasn’t sure if he was apologising or making an excuse.


“I’m not a very good personal assistant, am I?” Will asked bitterly, surprised at how relieved he was that the President wasn’t demonstrating any form of displeasure.

Hannibal smiled. “No. But I find your company to be more important than your retrieval of small items.”

Will had no idea why they always joked about otherwise uncomfortable topics. “You really should fire me, you know. Hire someone can do the job.”

“No one’s firing anyone,” Jack quickly assured everyone in the room.

Hannibal took a step to the door. “Accompany me, Will.”

“Right.” Will scrambled to get out of his chair, leading the way to the dining room down the hall where there was an exit to the back lawn.

“Jack, if you wouldn’t mind,” Hannibal said rather pointedly and Jack was forced to remain behind.

The back lawn offered far more privacy and as they walked side by side towards the basketball court, the other man asked, “Are you feeling well, Will?”

“I’m just getting my sleep cycles back to normal,” he admitted.

“You were dreaming.”
“Yes.”

Hannibal seemed to be looking at him out of his peripheral vision. “What were you dreaming of?”

“It’s not important.” Will regarded him with suspicion. “Did I say something?”

“No.”

They were quiet and Will turned his face away as he realised he was watching the President’s lips.

“Why don’t you just hire an actual assistant?” Will had no idea why an administration that prided itself in its efficiency would tolerate an aide that was certainly not meant to be one.

The President didn’t meet his eye. “It’s more interesting to have you here.”

He thought of was Georgia had told him, the quiet rumour that others tried to keep from his ears. “Was I hired to be your friend?”

The other man smiled, but didn’t say no. “You were hired for your mind.”

“Couldn’t I just have been hired as a consultant?” he pointed out.

“Perhaps. And then you would be within a different hierarchy and have to work with people, both of which I know would drive you to quit.”

“So I’m a lucky favourite of the President.”

“Tall soldiers, Will,” the President said simply.

“Tall soldiers,” Will agreed.

*****

Will was hunched over the file over the file of the Chesapeake Ripper’s third victim, one hand typing out a response to Alana on his Blackberry while the majority of his focus remained on the two photos he was flipping between. He knew he should’t be distracted as he replied to her and twice had to change what he’d written because it was involved with the inflicted wounds he was studying. Hannibal was running on the treadmill, creating a steady rhythm with his feet and his breathing, forming a white noise that Will thrived in.

“These knife wounds are very clean—steady hand, sure movement. I didn’t just walk into this—I know what I’m doing when I cut you open.” Will looked into the open abdominal cavity, at the empty space that should have held multiple organs. He’d read parts of Grey’s Anatomy and other medical textbooks, but looking at the actual anatomy was a completely different matter. Years ago this would have made him lightheaded, but as he fleshed out the persona of the killer, he was able to maintain clinical detachment; the man’s head was also missing, and not having a face to look at made everything easier.

The man had been identified by an elaborate tattoo on his chest, a ship sailing over waves in a style reminiscent of old Americana sailor tattoos. Will knew little of tattoos and added the topic to his ever growing list of things to research. ‘I always wanted a boat of my own. I’d name her ‘The Fifolet’.’

“I’m not familiar with that word. Is it Louisiana French?” Hannibal asked, stopping the treadmill and jumping off. At Will’s blank stare, he added, “You didn’t realise you were talking aloud.”

Alarmed at the other things he’d been thinking that had possibly been spoken aloud, his words came
out clipped. “No. I didn’t.”

But as per usual, the President’s face remained neutral. “What does ‘Fifolet’ mean?”

“It’s a myth about a burning light seen in the swamp, floating and beckoning all to follow. Some people think it’s a spirit that will lead you to treasure. If you find a fifolet and you mark the location of where it hovers, you can go back in the morning and dig up treasure,” he explained quickly, feeling stupid.

“The only light out on the water.”

“Yes.”

The President walked around him to the rowing machine. “It’s a nice name, Will.”

*****

Hannibal had a very strict rule about work ending at six every evening; unable to tolerate more that thirteen hours of sheep bleating mindlessly and acting as their shepherd, he made the demands under the guise of spending time with his daughter. It was nearing time to quit and he enjoyed the quietness of sitting at his desk while Will silently went over his agenda for the following day. Donald Sutcliffe walked in, staring down Will; Hannibal was finding his former colleague’s distrust of Will useful in reinforcing Will’s belief that he wasn’t wanted here, but it was also incredibly rude. Sutcliffe stalked over to the desk and Hannibal lifted up a single sheet of paper towards him.

“Have this list of people fired.”

Sutcliffe’s eyes went wide. “Fired?”

“Fired.” He could sense Will looking up at him.

A shocked laugh escaped Sutcliffe’s mouth. “You can’t just fire people, Hannibal. Washington doesn’t work like that.”

“It does now. They are not doing their job and they are wasting both time and money.” The list people were established and high ranking members of Washington DC’s political elite and for the most part displayed no real occupational talent.

“Anyone else you want to axe?” The tone was meant to be sarcastic, disbelieving.

Hannibal smiled. “They can wait until next month’s list.”

His fellow doctor’s lips pulled into a grim line, no longer attempted humour. “Are you going to do this monthly?”

He nodded once. “Yes.”

When Sutcliffe left the room—no doubt to complain to Jack—Hannibal saw Will smiling at him; he knew that the younger man had told Jack he needed a politician he could believe in and Hannibal was more than willing to accept the role.

///***///
(Will's dream.)

Chapter End Notes

Art can be found here: http://ninjaninaiii.tumblr.com/post/78146555859/part-2-2-of-the-illustrations
Chapter Fifteen

Today’s lunch was served later than usual and they convened in the Residence’s kitchen rather than the dining room in the West Wing. Hannibal and Will worked on something called ‘eggah’ that reminded Will of the frittata that was sometimes served at the GWU cafeteria during breakfast, only this had less egg and was topped with decorative patterns of walnuts and small barberries; Hannibal had explained they were putting a Persian twist on an Arabic dish and Will simply nodded as though he understood what he meant by it. Abigail arrived just as Hannibal plated the food and to Will’s surprise, it seemed they were to eat at the counter instead of in the dining room.

“Lunch for my kitchen cabinet,” Hannibal announced as Will and Abigail sat beside one another, placing their plates before them.

“Kitchen cabinet?” Abigail asked the President took his seat at the head of the counter.

“It means a group of trusted friends and associates that the president uses as his closest unofficial advisers,” Will explained, pouring a glass of water for Abigail from the pitcher before him.

“Like a brain trust?”

He smiled. “Similar. We’re not specialised in any particular field—mostly here to have ideas tossed at us.”

“You trivialise your importance to me, Will,” the President scolded. “In the Hoover administration, is advisors were nicknamed ‘the Medicine Ball Cabinet’ as they would play regular games of Hooverball with the president at the White House. I believe ‘Kitchen Cabinet’ is more suitable to our collective, though.”

The eggah had been served with saffron coloured rice, thick yogurt, and something called ‘torshi’ that looked to be nothing more than pickled vegetables; Hannibal poured them each a glass of wine, though less than usual, which was fine with Will—with his father’s history, he really had no business drinking every day. For once Will was patient enough to wait before he began to eat.

“So what’s on the agenda today, Mr President?” he asked, waiting for Abigail to take the first bite of lunch.

That seemed to be a ritual that Lecter indulged in—the cook never takes the first bite—and Will was eager to show that he’d noticed the rule, that he was willing to abide by it, too.

“No business while we eat.” Lecter watched as Abigail began to eat before picking up his own fork, signaling the start of their meal. “Instead we will dwell on finer topics, such as Abigail’s good taste in career choices. Where would I be without the best First Lady I could ask for?”

Hannibal smiled at him and Will raised his glass to toast the teenager, who began to laugh and protest. Hannibal brought their wine glasses together and Will wondered how he could have ever considered not taking this job.

*****

Hannibal adjusted his tie in a mirror on the inside of his closet door, while Will stood beside him, holding the mother of pearl cufflinks he’d be putting on next. He’d been asked to stay for the dinner with Governor Budge and while he’d rather be at home with his dogs and the radio, he didn’t have much of a choice but to accept the fact he’d be spending the evening in a social atmosphere.
“I’m afraid the only thing I’ll need of you this evening is to act as a distraction for one of my guests.”
Will frowned, handing over the cufflinks. “What do you mean?”
“Governor Budge will be accompanied by his assistant, who is…well meaning.”
“He’s a pain in the ass?”
Hannibal offered an amused smile. “Enthusiastic, is the word I’d use.”
Will grimaced. “What do you want me to do?”
“I would suggest a tour through the Residence. You can let him do all the talking.” The President straightened his sleeves and turned to look at him. “I apologise, but I must make you the sacrificial lamb tonight.”
“It’s okay.” Will supposed this was a fair trade to make for all the food he got to eat.
Hannibal reached out and brushed something off Will’s lapel. “I shall make it worth your time.”
Will huffed, hoping his annoyance wasn’t being taken as resistance. “I hope so.”
“You’ll want to wear a tie—please pick something of mine—and…” His eyes drifted up to Will’s messy hair.
Will began removing the tie he’d put on that morning. “You want me to brush my hair.”
“If it wouldn’t be an inconvenience.” Hannibal removed tie from his hand to stop him from crumpling it and shoving it in his pocket.
“I want dessert out of this,” Will joked as he investigated the vast array of ties all neatly rolled and arranged in some system he had yet to understand.
An hour and a half later as he stood in the kitchen with Hannibal, whom had finalising some sort of sauce, one of the evening time ushers named Leonard announced that Governor Budge and ‘company’ had arrived. Will abandoned the chocolate he’d been shaving off a block, leaving it for one of the chefs that had joined them in the kitchen to finish; he quickly rinsed off his hands and removed the apron he’d tied on before following Hannibal out to the Center Hallway, stomach knotting at the thought of whom he’d have to babysit this evening.
Emerging from the elevator was a very tall, slender man who was dressed as impeccably as Hannibal himself and a shorter, bearded man who was grinning ear to ear.
Hannibal offered out a hand. “Hello, Tobias.”
Governor Tobias Budge, Hannibal’s successor in Maryland, had a perfected politician’s smile. “Hannibal.”
The shorter man eagerly shook Hannibal’s hand without prompting, beaming at him. “Hello, President Lecter. How are you?”
“I’m well, Franklyn.” Hannibal gestured to Will. “This is my aide, Will Graham.”
Franklyn nodded, offering out his hand. “You helped on the campaign, then had that brain thing.”
With a sinking feeling, Will realised this was the ‘enthusiastic’ guest. “Yes.”
“Hello, Governor Budge.” Everyone turned to Abigail, who’d approached them rather quietly from the east.

Budge passed between Hannibal and Will, hand extended. “Good evening, First Lady.”

She smiled and then turned her attention to the second man. “Hello, Franklyn.”

He tried to shake her hand as well, but Budge hadn’t relinquished it. “It’s great to see you, Abigail. Having fun living in the White House?”

“Yes.” She nodded her head and then politely said, “If you will all excuse me.”

Budge’s eyes smile still remained. “It was nice to see you again.”

Franklyn managed to touch her shoulder. “See ya.”

Abigail disappeared off to the elevator, escaping off to who knew where and Will wished he could join her. Hannibal caught Will’s attention as an usher moved quietly around them with a tray of drinks in his hands.

“Tobias and I shall be in the Treaty Room,” he said and Will realised he was about to be left alone with the other assistant.

Budge and the President left them and Will sighed.

“So.” Franklyn was smiling at him still and Will wished that they could just have dinner already and get it over with.

“Want to have a tour of the Residence?” he offered drily.

“Yes!” He followed after Will, who decided that he’d rather walk down the grand staircase than ride in an elevator with him. “I’ve gone once a year since high school graduation, but this is going to be so great—no one else here.

“You probably know more about everything then I do,” Will admitted as he glanced at various paintings on the wall.

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant,” Franklyn quickly corrected, looking concerned that Will might not like him.

By the end of the tour, Will was absolutely exhausted; Franklyn was a man of many passions and little direction, leaving him feeling very scattered and anxious, unsure what direction his mind wanted to go. He had been offered half a dozen unfinished stories about Hannibal and Abigail, all sounding like a man on the outside looking in. He reeked of desperation, a need to have others’ approval, and had nudged Will in the side with his elbow twice whist telling a joke. ‘He’s kept around because he’s cheerful enough that he can smooth over anything Budge says. Without Franklyn, Budge would be a morose, distant politician no one would stand to be around. Franklyn provides the balance required to keep people from being off put.’ When an usher came downstairs to inform them that dinner was to be served, Will had never been so happy.

“Where’s Tobias?” Franklyn asked as he sat down at the table.

Hannibal poured wine into the four glasses at the table. “He had to make a phone call from the secure line.”
Franklyn began a longwinded discussion on what an important man Tobias was and how he was disappointed that their friendship felt rather one-sided. Will finally looked to Hannibal for mercy and it was granted swiftly.

“Franklyn, do you desire Governor Budge sexually?”

Hannibal asked the question so bluntly that Will felt almost as though he’d been hit in the face. Franklyn seemed equally as shocked, though not put off.

“What? No. No. Noooo. Heh, don’t get me wrong, I was in a ‘fraternity’…I tried things. It’s just not my brand.” His face lost its amusement and replaced it with intrigue. “Why, do you think he thinks about me like that?”

At that moment, Budge entered the dining room. “Who thinks about you what way?”

“We were discussing terms of friendship.” Hannibal said smoothly. “Will gifted me with a bottle of a late harvest Vidal from Linden. The Virginia wine revolution is upon us.”

“Tobias doesn’t like my taste in wine,” Franklyn interjected gloomily. “Or cheese.”

“I don’t know anything about wine,” Will mumbled, still embarrassed that the wine he’d brought was the one being served; he’d bought it and brought it after he’d had a hard day and had turned down yet another invitation, his way of apologising.

“The First Lady won’t be joining us?” Governor Budge asked, one of his eyebrows raised as Hannibal signaled the servers to bring their first course of food.

“Not this evening.”

Will wondered if he imagine the moment of disappointment in the Governor’s face, but was immediately distracted by Franklyn.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Abigail always tells the funniest jokes,” he lamented.

“Abigail attends the philharmonic with her father and afterwards, she would join us with the other patrons for discussions and cocktails,” Budge explained to Will coolly.

Will knew he was being mocked for not being part of the elite circle the Lecter’s ran in and he nearly snapped something ugly in return, but Hannibal spoke first.

“Will shall be accompanying us next time, of course.”

Will didn’t even have time to be shocked before Franklyn bombarded him with, “Oh, you’re going to learn a lot. They both know so much about music and art and theatre, it’s crazy.”

It dawned on Will that despite Franklyn’s money and clothing, he was just as much an outsider in this world as he was. He forced a smile at the other assistant’s enthusiasm, then turned his attention to the food on his plate, willing himself unnoticeable to the other three men in the room. Only twice did Hannibal turn the conversation, never once forcing him to actively participate, merely nod his head in agreement. The food was delicious, which was to be expected and when the dessert was finally served, Will felt as though he’d aged ten years; Franklyn’s nonstop talking, Budge’s thinly veiled insults, and Hannibal’s unusual humour had created a thousand fractures into his analysing mind, everything running rampant as it pieced together futures for their political alliances—Budge won’t get reelected without some big miracle because he’s alienating his voter base, Franklyn doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut and secrets will be exposed unless someone coaches him better,
Hannibal could exploit both of these things to his advantage and I can show him how if he asks—

“Wonderful, President Lecter. I’ve been dying to come to one of your dinners for years,” Franklyn exclaimed as he set down the fork on the empty plate.

“Will shall be assisting me with the cleaning up tonight,” Hannibal told the staff who came to collect the dishes.

As the servers left the room, Budge looked at Will in the way one might look at food that had been chewed and spit out. “Don’t you have employees to do that?”

“I enjoy the time alone to converse with him,” the President said as though it was the most natural conclusion in the world.

Will stared at the centrepiece in the middle of the table, drinking from his glass of water so he wasn’t expected to say anything.

Budge stood up from the table. “Well, Franklyn and I should be leaving. It was a pleasure to spend the evening with you, Hannibal.”

“And with you, Tobias.”

The President escorted both men out of the dining room and to the elevator. Will drank the last of his wine and quickly collected the plates from the table, carrying it to the kitchen.

There had been disapproval and something more—jealousy?—in Budge’s expression, which surprised Will. But then, it seemed that everyone was in a state of competing for Hannibal Lecter’s attention—never enough time, never enough words. Will supposed he was flattered—the nicest way of thinking, ‘thanks for the attention’ while still keeping that person at an arm’s length from him. Though he didn’t exactly know what he’d done to achieve such a status in the President’s eye; an interesting mind was one thing, but being an interesting companion was a completely different matter.

The kitchen had been cleaned entirely while they were eating which left only the dessert dishes.

“So we’re on dish washing duty?” Will asked when Hannibal returned and began to fill the right side of the double basin sink with hot water, running his fingers under the faucet.

“You’ll be drying tonight—” Hannibal paused upon seeing his daughter enter the room. “Abigail, would you like dessert?”

“Yes, please.” As Hannibal dried off his hands to retrieve the plate that had been left in the fridge, she sat down at the counter. “How was your dinner?”

He set the small cake down in front of her, retrieving a cleaned fork and a linen napkin for her. “It went well.”

“Perhaps I’ll be able to stay next time,” she said, cracking the chocolate shell with the fork. “Perhaps.”

So she’d been denied permission to join their dinner. From what Budge and Froideveux had said earlier about their accompaniment of the Lecters to other various functions, it obviously wasn’t a maturity issue; he wondered if perhaps it was punishment—because she’d killed Boyle?—or if he didn’t want a certain guest around her. Budge? He had seemed oddly intent in where Abigail was.
Something about Budge went beyond general rudeness—there was something more alarming under the surface.

“Will, is everything all right?” Hannibal asked.

“Yes, I—” he stopped himself from saying anything. “It’s nothing.”

Hannibal didn’t push the matter and he was sent home with a second dessert; as he sat on the steps of his back porch to eat it, watching the dogs running around in the dark back field, he loosened Lecter’s tie around his neck.

*****

Will was becoming accustomed to leaving the door of his office cracked open so that Hannibal didn’t feel shut out, welcome to enter anytime he wanted. Will considered this ‘friendship maintenance’—small, but necessary care to ensure that this fragile relationship between them didn’t shatter.

There was a shadow in the doorway and he glanced over to look at the President before he could knock.

“Will, are you busy?”

He set down the letters he had been reading. “No. What do you need?”

He stepped inside. “I was looking for a book that I believe might have had placed in here.”

Will stood up from his desk, stretching his legs as he walked over to the twin bookcases. “Which one?”

“‘Elmer Gantry’ by Sinclair Lewis.”

“Uh, let me check…” Will ventured a joke. “I hope you’re not using it for the speech to the cardinals.”

Hannibal didn’t smile, but the lines in his face relaxed slightly. “I was considering it.”

He took that as encouragement to continue the joke. “May I recommend something less satirical?”

“Such as?”

“Pretty much anything else.”

“Recommendation noted,” the President replied, smiling. “Perhaps something from the Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations?”

Will glanced over to the book Hannibal had removed from the opposite bookcase. “What edition is it?”

“The seventeenth.”

Will shook his head. “Oh, already read it.”

“You have it memorised then.”

“I’ve been reading it since its tenth edition. Not hard to memorise if it’s the only book you take with you everywhere you go.” He sat back on his heels for a moment. “My dad thought it would be
useful for me to have when I was in school.”

“He respected your intelligence, despite not understanding it.”

“Yeah well, he didn’t really have a choice.” Will didn’t like talking about his dad and glanced back at the older man, not meeting his eye. “What about your family? Did they respect your intelligence?”

“They did, despite not understanding it, either. They never expected me to be tied down to my career as much as I have been; Lecters can be prone to the whims of love, following whomever captures our heart.”

Will tried to imagine Hannibal so smitten he couldn’t function.

“And with a great voice he said:

_When love beckons to you, follow him,

_Though his ways are hard and steep._” The words, so familiar, came to Will without thinking.

Lecter smiled and then added to the passage, apparently knowing exactly what Will was referencing.

_

“Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself:

_He threshes you to make you naked.

_He sifts you to free you from your husks.

_He grinds you to whiteness.

_He kneads you until you are pliant;

And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God’s sacred feast.”_ Hannibal’s fingers rested against his lips for a moment, lost in thought. “I am fond of Kahlil Gibran’s work. I was not aware that you were familiar with it as well.”

Will gave an awkward chuckle. “My dad bought me his collected works for me before I left for college.”

“A good choice,” the President praised.

Will stood up with Elmer Gantry in hand. “I don’t think he realised he was a poet. I think he was trying to buy me something historical to help me for my classes. You know, something I could write a book report on.”

“And now I reap the rewards of your reading.”

Will’s toes curled in his shoes as Hannibal’s fingertip brushed down his as he retrieved the book and he couldn’t help but dwell on the fact that the fingers that touched him had just been against Hannibal’s lips. Will looked up quickly to the other man’s face and saw the President’s eyes looking at him. Hannibal tilted his head to the side just a fraction and Will looked back at the letters on his desk.

“I shall let you return to your work. Thank you, Will.”

Will gave a shaking nod, eager to get the man out of the room. Hannibal left and Will inhaled as a
chill ran up his spine, stomach tightening. Ever since that dream he’d had about—well, it was just a dream and it didn’t matter. It wasn’t unusual for people to accidentally to think of things like that. The only problem now was that he was letting his dominate his thoughts. Hannibal hadn’t intentionally touched him that way to provoke a response, it had simply been...well, Will wasn’t sure what other context that could be done in, but it wasn’t what he was thinking.

His Blackberry buzzed on his desk, causing him to jerk back in surprise, but now that he was out of his uncomfortable thoughts, he rushed over to answer the distinct tone he’d set for Georgia.

“Hello, Georgia.”

“Would you like to have lunch with Beth and I today?”

“I would like that very much,” he said quickly and she delightedly told him to meet her in the cafeteria downstairs at noon.

*****

As had been expected the five top level people the President had had fired in the Department of Defense, the Pentagon, and the Department of Education, there had been considerable fall out. Many news networks were speculating the mass exodus of high ranking position holders in some of the most important jobs in the country; when Hannibal had been governor of Maryland, he’d started out his first year in office firing nearly everyone and then appointing new people to those positions, seeking to end corruption and those waiting to retire with a golden parachute.

Will wanted to tell the President how astonishing it had been to see such a shakeup in Washington, that there would finally be progress made in so many areas that had long gone neglected, like sores in need of new dressings. But he kept his mouth shut as he sat across from Hannibal at the large table in the Cabinet Room, not wanting to sound like the students he’d had in GWU, who spoke in such reverent tones, eyes wide and glimmering with youth.

His personal phone rang, a very rare occurrence, and after checking the caller ID to make sure it wasn’t a wrong number, he answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Mr Graham. This is Beatrice at Dr Wellman’s office.”

Will wondered if it was good news or bad news. “Oh.”

“Uh, the doctor needs to reschedule your appointment. I have an opening available at seven fifteen this evening, if that would work for you?” the receptionist asked.

“Uh, let me see.” Will pulled the phone away, covering the receiver with one hand and looked in the direction of the President. “I...I need to go to my doctor’s this evening.”

“For your encephalitis?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal’s eyes lifted from the papers he was reading. “I would like to attend if you will permit it.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Curiosity.”
“It’s an MRI. Nothing exciting.” Will wondered if the other man was hoping to watch some complicated procedure.

At this, the President offered him a large smile. “On the contrary, Will.”

“We have to be there at seven-fifteen,” Will told him, wondering if it was a warning or a pleading to come along anyway. He hated doctors’ offices.

Hannibal merely nodded. “I’ll have the proper arrangements made.”

Will took his hand off the phone to speak to the receptionist again. “Yes, that will work for me.”

“Great. I’ll let Dr Wellman know.”

*****

At exactly seven o’clock, Hannibal arrived with Will at the specialist’s office, taking a covert motorcade that used nondescript vehicles and they waited until the sidewalk was devoid of people to exit for the private practice. Will was shown to a private exam room, Hannibal trailing after him; he was well aware it wasn’t professional for him to be in there, but if Will didn’t want him in there, he simply had to say it.

Dr Wellman was a comely woman who barely came up to his shoulder, blonde hair pulled back into a low pony tail and wearing French mauve surgical scrubs beneath her white doctor’s coat. Wellman was considered the best neurologist in Washington DC and Hannibal had ensured last summer that Will would have access to her services. It was less a gesture of kindness and more one to cover his own interests as it wouldn’t look good for a presidential candidate and former doctor to drop a seriously ill employee from the roster without good help. And there was nothing wrong for wanting the gorgeous affliction to be documented as thoroughly as possible.

Dr Wellman was smiling broadly at him, and he allowed Will to introduce the two of them, shaking her hand firmly as a colleague.

“Mr President, it’s an honour to have you here,” she said as Will drifted away to create a comfortable space, never accustomed to being close to others.

“Thank you for allowing me into your practice,” Hannibal said appreciatively.

Will anticipated her next question. “He…he was the one that diagnosed it.”

The doctor looked at him curiously. “Really? How did you know?”

While he was proud of his many abilities, he loathed how people interpreted it into a sideshow instead of a masterpiece. “I could smell it.”

Her eyes went wide. “Sm-smell it?”

Will leaned in close to study a legal notice of services for health insurance on the wall. “‘A fevered sweetness’, he called it.”

Hannibal was thrilled Will had remembered the exact words he’d used. “Encephalitis has a very distinct aroma, as do all illnesses.”

“That’s amazing. I had no idea.” She looked at him in fascination. “How does he smell to you now?”

“Of his aftershave.” Hannibal smiled at Will and Will smirked.
“Oh, sorry. That was a weird question to ask.” She gave a laugh and motioned over to a medical tray that had been set up. “Well, let’s draw some blood and have you get ready for the MRI.”

“I can assist, if you would like.” Hannibal kept his tone neutral, generous, while on the inside he was eager to be so close to Will in such an intimate way.

She nodded, her smile the same as any other doctor trying to get out of extra work. Hannibal quickly removed his jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves to wash his hands thoroughly in the sink, slipping on the nitrile gloves from the box hanging on the wall. He was reminded briefly of his time as a surgeon and the excitement of encountering the human body.

“You aren’t afraid of needles, are you, Will?” he asked politely as he watched Will rolling up his shirt sleeve.

“Not at all.”

“Good,” Hannibal praised. Hannibal drew the blood slowly, savouring the sight of pulling it from Will’s body. It was beautiful and he carefully tucked the memory away into the recipe box of his memory palace.

“Any new symptoms, Mr Graham?” Dr Wellman asked as he finished stemming the blood flow and placed a small bandage over the minute wound. “Headaches? Fevers or sweating? Cold chills?”

“Uh, no.”

“Are you experiencing any auditory or visual hallucinations?”

Whether he’d meant to or not, Will’s eyes darted over to Hannibal’s general direction. “No.”

“Okay, great.”

Hannibal didn’t allow himself to smile, wondering what it was that Will was experiencing that would cause him to lie.

Dr Wellman stood and motioned for Hannibal to come with her. “I shall leave you to change.”

A light tinge coloured Will’s cheekbones. “See you.”

Hannibal shut the door behind him and covertly reading what she was writing on the file (her handwriting was atrocious), he asked, “May I ask permission to view the scan? I’m very curious about the results.”

She shrugged. “Oh, sure. If Mr Graham gives the ‘okay’, I’d be more that happy to let you in.”

When Will emerged, he was dressed in one of the bland hospital gowns that to Hannibal always managed to appear tired and old, and they walked down the hallway to the scanning room; Agent Price was positioned between himself and Will, so Hannibal took the opportunity to take in his surroundings instead. As expected, Will wasn’t troubled at the request he monitor the scan and he was led into the observation room as Will was taken to the lie in the MRI bed. After a few moments, he was joined by the Dr Wellman and Agent Price stood outside the door to give privacy.

“Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis,” Dr Wellman declared almost proudly. “Only had one case other than him.”

He nodded as though he was interested, watching Will’s hands for any signs of the nervous fist
clenching he’d occasional exhibited; he was aware that was a tic often created during encephalitis, though knowing how anxious the other man was, it could always manifest regardless.

“May I see the readings from his first check up with you?” he finally asked after an appropriate amount of time.

“Uh, sure, lemme pull them up.” She quickly brought up the files onto the screen. “Here you are.”

He reached out and touched the screen, fingers tracing over the sporadic clusters of glorious reds and oranges on the young man’s mind. This had been Will when they’d first met—mind aflame and burning from the inside out. He would do anything to experience Will in that state again, to watch him slowly unravel, to drown in his arms. Insanity in the sanest mind beyond his own.

“No tumours,” he finally stated when he knew his lingering touch would raise suspicion in the other doctor.

“No, thank god. Just inflammation, easy enough to take care of and keep an eye on.”

Being a doctor, Hannibal was curious how this rare malady was failing to thrive within in a patient who was never meant to be his. “He responded well to the initial treatment?”

“Yes. It’s been a bit slow with him, but we caught it in time.”

Hannibal glanced at her with brief dissatisfaction before returning his attention to the screen. She had nothing to do with this beautiful rearrangement of thoughts. That belonged to him.

*****

That night, Will drowsily felt his way through his pleasure, imagining tentative and soft touches, exploring fingers and carefully manicured nails, warm and smooth palms, imagining a thumb that spread fluid across his swollen head, imagining a grip that knew exactly when to tighten and could find a proper rhythm, imagining Hannibal’s fingers stroking across Will’s as he moved his hand—

Will’s eyes snapped open as the feeling curled warm and beautiful in his brain. Will fought against it, his exhausted mind pliant yet unwieldy, impossible to reign in. Beth Lebeau's delicate laugh and low cut shirts, the usher who had the most luscious thighs, Hannibal licking the tip of his thumb before swiping it across the bottom of the page, flipping the paper over on the file Will brought him as their eyes met—

He moaned, both in frustration and in need. Hannibal’s mouth moving into a smile that seemed both cruel and tender, tongue darting out to wet his lips, smiling just for Will, the way he leaned in to speak only to him, the round sound of Will’s name in his mouth, the way he’d adjust the broad knot of his tie. It was the most dangerous thing to think of and now he was too awake not to realise what he was doing. He shivered, biting down on his lower lip so that—oh god—he didn’t say anyone’s name.

Sated, exhausted, and supremely disappointed as to where the night’s thoughts had taken him, he peeled off his shirt and used it to wipe up the mess on his skin, throwing it to the floor as he fell back on the bed. Unable to keep his eyes open any longer, he curled up on his side, and hoped not to dream of anything.
Hannibal had just laughed at something Will had said, smiling at him over his wine glass. Will was having a hard time stopping himself from returning smile as the President’s cousin was in the dining room with them, looking unamused as she picked at the lunch she’d brought along. Hannibal gave an equally witty response to Will’s joke and Will couldn’t help but grin down at his plate, choosing to eat another piece of tongue rather than reply. Hannibal refilled his wine glass yet again, and Du Maurier excused herself, her smile curt. Left alone with the President, he cleared his throat awkwardly; the wine left him feeling warm and he was in a better mood than he could remember in a while.

“I apologise for my cousin’s lack of humour.” His eyes were on Will’s lips before returning to Will’s eyes, prompting him to look away.

“It…it wasn’t a very funny joke.”

“I liked it.” Hannibal’s lips held a smirk that Will’s brain immediately categorised into the ‘charming’ section of the President’s expressions he’d memorised; it might be useful for him to wear the next time he did a daytime talk show. Hannibal’s lips twitched slightly and Will realised he’d been staring. “In thirty minutes we shall reconvene for the meeting with Governor Christie.”

“Right.” Will stood from the table, stretching his arms comfortably above his head. “Can I help you with the dishes?”

“The kitchen shall take care of them.”

Will hesitated before leaving the table, allowing the President to usher him out, feeling the heat of his hand at the small of his back, though never quite touching.

“I think I drank too much,” he admitted, considering that Hannibal might prefer that he stay in the office.

“Just a touch. I shouldn’t have refilled your glass the third time.”

“I’ll, uh, try to sober up. Don’t want to say anything stupid while we’re in a meeting.” He opened the door to his office.

“Nothing you could say to him would be stupid, Will.” A hand brushed against the back of Will’s neck and he shivered, listening to the President explain, “There was a stray thread.”

“Oh.” Will wanted to call bullshit, but he didn’t dare. What would be gained from that? “I’ll see you in a moment.”

Hannibal’s eyes drifted down momentarily to Will’s mouth once more before he left and once alone in his office, Will sat down at his desk heavily. Contemplating. He shouldn’t contemplate with alcohol in his system—he already knew that about himself, but he couldn’t stop himself when he was sober, let alone when he was just on the right side of tipsy. His eyes locked onto the painting on the opposite wall, staring at the small ship. Was he imagining things? He knew that he was often criticised of having an overactive imagination—was that what was happening? Because he knew Hannibal was trying to be friendly with him—‘Or we could act like adults. God forbid we become
friendly,’ the President had said during their first ride in the motorcade together—and it was the
President’s nature to put people at ease, tend to them when they were guests at his table, but this was
all the time, this wasn’t simply at the table, and were they really friends now? Will was pretty
confident that friends didn’t touch fingers or necks or rest their hands on the small of the back. And
the lingering way he stared. And the wine. Will squinted at the painting on the wall; Hannibal Lecter
was a man who could afford to flirt subtly, unlike him, where he verged on awkward and desperate,
just like his attempts to sustain the friendship between himself and the President. Perhaps Hannibal
thought Will was flirting first and was returning the gesture? Obviously he wasn’t shying away from
it, if that’s what he thought. Will didn’t touch—he had to think of whom all he considered to be his
friend—he didn’t touch Georgia’s hands. Or—he paused again—Beverly. He only ever attempted
physical contact with—

Alana.

Whom he wanted to be ‘more than friends’ with.

He blanched slightly. ‘We hid a body together,’ his mind supplied helpfully and he tilted his head,
acknowledging that before a level of distaste made itself present itself. Hiding bodies with someone
didn’t create a level of intimacy—‘Does this change the nature of our relationship?’ Hannibal had
asked—oh god, is that what was happening? And naturally, thoughts of what he’d masturbated to
the previous night flooded his brain immediately after that. Will tapped his hand anxiously on the thin
armrest of his chair, then clambered to his feet.

“I shouldn’t have had the wine,” he muttered to himself, leaving his office to go wash his face and
brush his teeth in the bathroom.

The meeting with Governor Christie was held in Jack’s office at the oval table that had odd scratch
marks on the surface that he imagined drove the President insane, so as he made the note to have
maintenance department reseal the surface, he covered some of the deeper gouges with the
paperwork he’d brought with him, taking care to organise the paper neatly because that’s what
Hannibal liked, right? Neatness and order? He sat to Hannibal’s right, transcribing quick notes and
speculations that he knew Hannibal could glance at covertly and raise as issues regarding the money
the New Jersey governor wanted as relief for Hurricane Sandy. Fortunately the governor was already
on good terms with the President as it had been Hannibal’s connexions to Doctors Without Borders
and the Red Cross that had provided critical help for the disaster before Chilton could organise
FEMA to do the same.

For the smallest of moments as he wrote down notes, he realised that he was sitting close enough to
Hannibal that if he shifted his left leg over, it would touch the President’s right. ‘I am not drinking at
lunch anymore,’ he thought to himself amusedly, wondering if he could break the other man’s
concentration.

The President picked up one of the spare pens and eyes not leaving Christie’s, nor breaking the
conversation, he drew a solid line through what Will had just written. Will glanced back down and
realised he’d been writing the same thing over, his brain caught in a loop as he thought about being
close to someone who possibly wanted to be more than friends. Embarrassed, he brought his knees
together and forbid himself to continue thinking about Hannibal.

*****

“Well this is fucking ruined,” Will snapped as he roughly tugged the knot out of his tie, stomping to
the men’s bathroom which the Secret Service was clearing and securing.

A protester had thrown fake blood all over Will in an attempt to get the President, and he’d been too
shocked to react at first, feeling Hannibal’s hand dig into his upper arm and lead him into the
university where a quick evaluation of the substance confirmed that it was dyed corn syrup. They
were in Dallas, Texas and there had been a surprisingly heavy crowd of anti-abortion protesters in
attendance, shouting about the President’s pro-life stance. Alone in the bathroom with Hannibal, who
was dutifully wetting paper towels, Will couldn’t help but appreciate the irony that this was the
second time a president had had a bloody arrival in Dallas.

Will angrily threw the tie in one of the sinks and pulled off his jacket, tossing it on the countertop; as
he began to unbutton his shirt, which stuck to his chest in the most uncomfortably way, Hannibal
began to wash the disgusting concoction off his face.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but this didn’t convince me to change my stance on the pro-life, pro-
choice debate,” Will finally grated out, angry and humiliated; he has no doubt an image of this will
be at the top of Tattle-Politic by the end of the afternoon.

“I don’t believe it changed my mind either,” Hannibal said serenely, moving Will’s glasses to the
countertop as Will finished unbuttoning his shirt and yanked the tails out of his trousers.

“What do I do with this?” he asked, crumpling the shirt in his hands.

“Throw it away.”

“Can you have someone run to the campus bookstore and buy me a clean t-shirt, then?” he snapped,
irritated with Hannibal’s impracticality.

The older man discarded the paper towels in the trash can and proceeded to wash his hands in one of
the sinks. “You may wear my spare.”

“You’re serious.”

“This shirt makes my skin crawl, Will. It’s threadbare along the cuffs and it distracts me.” Hannibal
tossed the stained garment into the trashcan, ignoring Will’s feeling of sudden embarrassment at the
state of his clothes.

The President retrieved the bag Will carried all his belongings in and carefully selected the spare
maroon shirt he’d brought along in the event it was needed. Hannibal shook out the creases while
allowing Will to scrub at his chest with the paper towels, and then as though he was a child, held the
shirt out for him to slip his arms into.

“You deserve nicer things, Will,” Hannibal said in a lower tone, and Will wondered if he was
apologising.

“It’s too big.” Will wondered if he was accepting the apology.

“No one will notice.” The President took a step back and turned to face the stalls so Will could have
some privacy as he undid his belt and trousers to properly tuck the shirt in. As he finished re-
buckling the belt and checking three times to make sure his fly was zipped, he cleared his throat to
signal to Hannibal that he was finished. Hannibal appraised him. “The colour compliments you.”

The door to the bathroom opened as Will began to knot the spare tie Hannibal had produced from the
bag Will carried and Beverly held out a plastic bag with the school’s logo on the front. “Everything
okay? The dean brought over a campus jacket if you want it.”

Hannibal answered for them. “Thank you, Agent Katz. I believe we have sorted the matter out
now.”
Beverly grinned at Will. “See me tackle her, Graham?”

“That will be all, Agent Katz,” the President dismissed, the corner of his mouth twitching in amusement.

She withdrew and shut the door, Will biting back a smirk at the thought of her giving swift and painful recourse to the protester that had thought it was a good idea to throw something at the President.

“She is trying to impress you,” Hannibal commented as he checked his hair in the mirror.

“Beverly likes impressing everyone. She’s the eldest child, trying to prove to everyone she’s capable at her job, which makes her a perfect choice for a bodyguard, because she’s so purpose driven and desperate to make you happy,” he recited from the thoughts he often had whilst around her and then quickly added, “You know, just my opinion.” He frowned as he watched the President pull the soiled tie out of the sink and carry it over to the trashcan. “Are you throwing that away, too?”

“I told you that I’d buy you others—“

“Don’t,” Will spat, annoyed and self-conscious about how he must look to sophisticated President Lecter.

Hannibal turned back to look at him, his expression as close to exasperation as he could come. “My dear Will. Humour me for once.”

The door opened to the bathroom again before either of them could speak and Jack leaned his head in.

“Hannibal, you’re needed in about ten minutes. Wrap this up.” Then in after thought, he added, “You okay, Will?”

“I’m fine,” Will lied.

“I’ll be there in a moment, Jack.” Hannibal turned his back to his Chief of Staff and Jack left, shutting the door once more. Attention now completely back to Will, the President took the opportunity to adjust his shirt cuffs and in a very clipped tone said, “I do not feel that now would be the appropriate time to discuss your neuroses regarding our perceived class differences and the structures of what is appropriate between the intersections of our personal and professional relationships.” Will clenched his hands into fists and when Hannibal spoke again, his tone had softened. “Are you ready to leave this room?”

Will didn’t want to answer that, because he lived in a constant state of not wanting to return to the outside world, no matter how uncomfortable he might be, and defensively, he made an attempt to buy more time. “I’ve been meaning to, uh… ask you and Abigail if you…”

“Yes, Will?”

He pretended to be very interested in washing his glasses off and drying them off. “I wanted to cook dinner for you and Abigail. Let you have a night off.”

“What time shall we come over?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—I thought—“ He gave a one shouldered shrug and put his glasses back on. “I mean, you’re welcome to come to Wolf Trap if you wanted. Not a lot to see there.”
“The stars.” The President adjusted Will’s tie.

“Yeah.” Will agreed, looking at himself in the mirror.

Hannibal said nothing more and they left for the speech.

Will’s hand kept reaching up to touch the soft material around his neck. This morning after breakfast he’d found a box on his desk with a small handwritten note atop it from Hannibal. ‘For what was discarded.—HL’. He opened the box hesitantly and found, wrapped in white tissue paper, a new shirt and coordinating tie. The tie was exquisite and from touch alone, Will knew it was actual silk. The thread was so dark it was almost black, but the moment it caught in the light, it revealed its green hue. The shirt was the most luxurious cotton, a hunter green that is so rich he can’t help but touch it carefully, lest he ruin it.

It felt as though there was a charge in the air as he asked himself: should he be allowed to accept such nice things? They were expensive—there is no question about that—and he decided that he could at least try the shirt on to tell Hannibal that it didn’t fit and then he’d have an actual reason to reject it. Quietly he removed his own cheap tie and stripped out of his plain white shirt—threadbare at the cuffs, he acknowledged bitterly—and put the green shirt on, buttoning it up and tucking it into his trousers. It fit perfectly. Quickly he added the tie and with a sinking feeling knew that they were perfect. This was something that he imagined Hannibal wearing to host a dinner, something that was elegant and bold against the simplicity of the brown flannel suit. And there would be a flamboyant arrangement of peacock feathers and horns on the table’s runner—a swing of the pendulum—the scent of something succulent hanging heavy in the air—the pendulum drawing again—the scent coming from the kitchens that rivaled anything he’s ever cooked or eaten. Abigail would sit to his left, the closest to his heart, and when he turns to his right, he sees Hannibal, his face placid as it always is. He looks Will’s new clothes over and there is approval in his eyes.

“I am at the head of the table. I am the guest of honour,” Will announces, a smile fighting its way onto his lips. “The table has been set because I am coming.”

He’s dressed like Hannibal, but he’s not really Abigail’s father, he’s Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Smelling of the earth and damp leaves from the hunting grounds of the Frederick Municipal Forest. He takes his glasses and puts them on the floor beside his chair. He looks down at the food on the plate before him—it’s all swimming in blood, the fake kind made from corn syrup and red food dye. He takes a taste of it and decides it reminds him of guilt for being poor.

He points a finger threateningly at Abigail. “If you don’t eat your growing foods, you won’t get dessert.”

Abigail takes a quick bite of her broccoli, her eyes frightened as she chews. He turns to look at Hannibal, who is neatly cutting into a liver.

“You have to be strict with children.” He glances at Abigail coolly, wanting her to understand that this is empathy. “You think I’m a control freak, but this is for your own good.”

Hannibal nods once. “Tell me about your mother, Will.”

“Tell me about yours, Dr Lecter.”

Hannibal isn’t offended by his mocking tone and after he takes a bite of the bleeding meat, he answers. “She’s rotting in the ground because there is no heaven.”
“My mother is alive and well and deserves to be rotting in the ground instead,” Will offers, hoping Hannibal sees the remark as empathy.

Hannibal politely passes him both the salt and pepper. “Do you want to kill her?”

Will feels the bitterness coil around his legs, tendrils growing up from the floor beneath the dining room table. “Yes. She left us. Isn’t that rude—“

“WILL!”

Will jerked out of his vision, seeing a furious Jack Crawford standing in the door of his office. A brief glance at the clock above the door informed him he had been in his office for two hours and would definitely be late to the meeting Hannibal was scheduled to have with Secretary Obama.

“I—“ Will stopped protesting when he spotted Hannibal.

“This is the second time you’ve been sleeping or whatever it is you’re doing…” Jack trailed off as Hannibal held up a hand and approached Will, kneeling in front of him.

Will’s movements were jerky and he kept his eyes on Hannibal’s tie as his breathing started to steady; Hannibal kept his eyes on Will’s face.

“Jack, if you will permit me a moment with Will.”

“Sure.” Jack seemed hesitant—‘He’s afraid to leave the President alone in here with me,’ Will recognised—but finally agreed. “I’ll be waiting out here.”

The door shut behind Jack and Will dared to look at the President. His face was neutral as ever, but his brow was showing the smallest hints that the man was troubled.

Hannibal’s voice was low and soothing. “Let me check you for a fever.”

The President was motionless before him and it dawned on Will that he was asking for permission, so he nodded quickly and the back of Hannibal’s hand came to rest gently against Will’s left cheek for a few seconds before shifting to a soft palm on his forehead. Hannibal’s eyes were so concerned and Will shut his, allowing himself to be dragged under by thoughts of compassion and tenderness that he hadn’t felt since he was a child. People rarely touched him and when they did it was awkward attempts at camaraderie or clinical evaluations. Never someone whose entire aura said, ‘Trust me. I’m not here to hurt you.’

He took a deep breath, relaxing at the quiet of the office, his mind slowly clearing from its confusing haze of being the man who tried to kill Abigail and being the man he wanted to be, an actual father to her.

Hannibal had large hands, Will noted, as sculpted fingers rest against his skin delicately, a smooth thumb spanning to touch his temple. Will’s head rolled slightly and Hannibal’s hand followed, allowing Will to acclimate himself with reality once more; how often did Hannibal get in his personal space, he wondered, quickly tallying up any time he could think of. Often enough, but never physical contact. ‘That would be rude,’ he thought to himself.

Will’s eyes shot open and he pulled back as though he’d been burned; he’d been leaning in needfully, pathetically, to the other man’s touch. He cleared his throat loudly, eyes turning to look out the window, anywhere but the man still kneeling before him. Hannibal seemed unfazed by it, which would make sense; doctors had to deal with a wide range of responses from their patients during exams.

“You’re a little warm, but nothing that can’t be fixed by turning down the thermostat and perhaps
taking a walk in the fresh air.” Hannibal stood up and took a step back. “Would you like to accompany me to Aunt Jacqueline’s garden, Will? I could use some fresh air myself.” He didn’t want to look at him, but the President pressed him for an answer. “Will?”

Will found his voice and it was upset. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.” He stood from his chair and pushed past the President, needing to clear his head. He hurried out of the office, brushing past Jack as his anxiety began to rise to a point where he wanted to scream. He knew he was fleeing, making his way upstairs to the men’s bathroom between the Domestic Policy Council and National Economic Council offices. The staff bathroom was a brilliant vulgar red that made Will think of The Shining. He shuddered and immediately went to the sink, filling it with water and then submerged his face in it. In the back of his mind, he could hear a voice of reason scolding him for how unhygienic it was, but the cold water on his face was therapeutic, bringing a stillness and quiet that was unfortunately brief. Sharp footsteps caused him to jerk his head up and grab for a paper towel to wipe off his face. It was Jack and he looked livid.

“Will, what the fuck is going on with you? First you’re falling asleep in your office—“

“It’s not sleeping!” Will protested.

“—then you’re popping pills like it’s going out of style! And you’re—“

A man opened the door, oblivious to the argument that was happening.

“Use a different facility!” Jack screamed at the man, who bolted out of the bathroom. Jack then rounded back on Will. “If you don’t want to work here, then just leave! We don’t need all these stupid games—“

“I’m not trying to get fired—“

“Why are you shouting?”

Both turned to see the President standing at the door, his jaw tight and drawn up taller that he usually held himself.

Jack took a step back and dropped his voice. “Hannibal—I was—I needed to talk to Will.”

Hannibal looked over at him, taking an immediate step forward. “Jack, Will has a fever—“

Will threw up his hands, not wanting to be touched by anyone anymore. “Please don’t! It’s nothing! Just the start of a cold,” he lied. “It’s a cold.” He turned his head away. “Sorry.”

During the silence, Will assumed the President had given his chief of staff a look as Jack abruptly decided to excuse himself. They were quiet and Will finally asked,

“Not a very dignified place to hold a meeting about my mental state, is it?”

He offered a grimacing smile to Hannibal, who doesn’t look affected. “Why don’t we take an early lunch? We’ll go up to the kitchen and we can talk in private.”

“Don’t you have something…” he knew for a fact that the President was supposed to be in a meeting at this very moment.

“I shall send Bedelia in my place.”
Will knew that the Du Maurier was far more active in the political affairs of the White House than Vice Presidents previous, but that didn’t mean the President should have to miss important conferences for his sake. “I don’t want you to get blamed.”

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice was grounding. “You mustn’t allow those thoughts to dominate your needs.” He held the door open for Will. “I shall make you comfort food.”

Will hesitated. “Who’s type of comfort? Yours or mine?”

Hannibal’s eyes glinted red. “Let me surprise you.”

Will knew he was not imagining the eyes staring at him with suspicion as he walked back to the Residence with the President. While the White House had been good about keeping gossip in house, it was still gossip and he knew that where it concerned him, word traveled fast.

Hannibal instructed Will to wait on the veranda, that lunch would be brought out to him and as Will sat patiently, an usher brought out a tray with two glasses and a pitcher of fresh lemonade, which Will helped himself to as he waited. When the President finally arrived, Will was relaxed, albeit hungry; Hannibal set the tray of food between them, three covered plates that made Will raise an eyebrow, hoping that too much effort hadn’t been made. The plate closest to him was uncovered with a flourish and Hannibal declared proudly, “A croque-monsieur using Jamón Ibérico de Bellota, Gruyère, and bread baked this morning in the kitchens.”

“You’re made me a grilled cheese,” Will declared.

Hannibal paused and his expression had become mysteriously blank. “Yes.”

Will smiled because, yes, it was good comfort food. “Thank you.”

The other man’s face relaxed as though he suddenly saw Will had been attempting to joke with him. “My pleasure.”

Will took a bite of the sandwich, savouring the food as Hannibal uncovered his own plate and after allowing the other man to get a chance to eat, Will decided not to put off the inevitable. “So let’s talk.”

“As you wish, Will.” Hannibal dabbed at his mouth with the corner of his napkin.

“I am not sick from the encephalitis still. I have a cold. That’s all. All of the meds and poor eating last year really compromised my immune system. But I’ve taken care of that—I’m taking my meds.” He looked up to the President’s face in hopes that he understood he wasn’t doing this intentionally.

“I suppose that leaves me to making sure you’re properly fed.”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant.”

“No, Will. We must get you better.” Hannibal uncovered the dish between them to show a plate of cut fruit. “What kind of fruit do you want?”

Will sighed heavily instead of answering.

Hannibal lifted a fork that rest beside the plate, ready to serve Will. “I shall choose a pear for you unless you’d rather have something else.”

Will knew when he didn’t have a choice. “Pear would be good.”
“I agree. It’s sweetness will compliment the saltiness of the ham and cheese.”

Pear was added to his plate and they ate in silence, looking out over the back lawn the Ellipses. It wasn’t until Will started on the second half of his sandwich that the other man spoke again.

“Is it good, Will?”

“It’s very good.” He gave a tired smile. “You know, if this political thing doesn’t work out, you could always open a restaurant.”

Hannibal brought a grape to his mouth. “Have you considered that you’re imagining your symptoms?”

“What, like I’m crazy?”

“No, that’s not what I said.”

“You think I’m a hypochondriac?” Will’s voice betrayed his displeasure.

“Not at all.” Hannibal set his fork down. “You have become accustomed to the symptoms of your encephalitis and they have created a sense of identity for the side of yourself that you fear. They allow you to feel as thought the dark thoughts you harbour are actually not products of your own mind.”

“I suppose it could be that.” It wasn’t the craziest thing he’d ever heard. “Are you going to tell Jack?”

“That this could be more than a fever? No, I won’t told Jack.” His voice lowered, almost teasing. “It could be our secret.”

“We already have so many,” Will admitted darkly.

“Relationships rely on secrets.”

“Do they?”

“They create bonds.” Hannibal tilted his head slightly. “Do you not desire bonds with others?”

“I don’t know anymore.” Will ducked his head in shame.

“Yes, you do.”

“There isn’t room in myself for anyone else. How can I have room for anyone else when I can’t escape my own head?” He shook his head. “If I get focused on something for too long and can’t channel it elsewhere,” he explained, thinking about how obsessively he’d been focused on the Chesapeake Ripper. “With politics I can vent it all out and get immediate results. I rarely have to dwell on things.”

“I have put you in a compromising position. This is my fault.”

“No, no, I—“ He swallowed hard, hating the sudden look on Hannibal’s face, the tinges of self-loathing that he knew all too well. “I can do this, Hannibal. Just give me a chance.”

“I feel responsible for you,” Hannibal said gently.

Dispair tightened in Will’s gut; he didn’t want to be placed on a pedestal. “You shouldn’t.”
“You are my friend, Will. It’s unacceptable for me to do this to you.”

“No…Hannibal…I can do this. I—I’m seeing who he is. You need me to do this.”

“I do not wish for a mental breakdown in my friend.” Hannibal forced eye contact. “If this ever becomes more than you can assume, tell me. You do not have to lie to me, Will. There should be no secrets between us.”

Will knew he was right; lying to a doctor could have grave consequences and if Hannibal was already willing to keep him here knowing that he was recovering from something severe, it was safe to assume there wasn’t much that could shock him.

“I’ve been having dreams again.”

“Of what?” When Will didn’t answer, Hannibal filled in the blanks. “They are violent.”

“Ugly, grotesque versions of reality.” He didn’t dare admit that they involved Hannibal or Abigail. That they were dreams of fitting into their familial unit, dominating them with his presence. Being feared. Being revered.

No, those things should remain private for now.

*****

“What did you hallucinate?” Hannibal asked in the quiet tone he reserved for when they were in green rooms, sitting side by side.

“Out on the campaign trail,” Will clarified, looking up from his Blackberry. The other man gave him a small nod and Will dropped his voice, forcing them both to lean in closer so that the people around them wouldn’t hear. “There was a large stag that was following me. It was covered in dark feathers. Nothing special.”

It was hardly a psychology session Will could have ever imagined himself having, sitting backstage on a trendy, oversized ottoman beside the President of the United States after making a very successful appearance on Morning Joe. It seemed Hannibal enjoyed unwinding after these television sessions by having very close conversations that revolved around Will’s mental state.

“I disagree. Hallucinations give us insight to our most inner selves, much like dreams.”

Will almost rolled his eyes. “I try not to put too much stock into dream analysis.”

Hannibal smiled, seeming pleased that he was able to get a rise out of him. “You dream of dark things.”

“And what do you dream about, Dr Lecter?” he murmured, trying to keep the edge out of his voice that would attract attention to them.

“Family.”

Will cringed, worrying he’d crossed a line; he didn’t want to make Hannibal think about whatever atrocities that had occurred to him as a child. Will lowered his eyes to Hannibal’s tie, chastened. “I dream about things you probably wouldn’t want to hear about.”

“I do want to know,” Hannibal insisted and Will’s eyes looked around the room apprehensively.

“The Secret Service is already uncomfortable enough with my being here. Probably shouldn’t say
Hannibal leaned in even closer, his voice a whisper. “You dream of killing people. Of the dead.”

Will knew to keep his fucking mouth shut when he was around people who had the power to actually lock him away in a nut house. As if he could read Will’s mind, Hannibal continued. “You needn’t be ashamed of it. Killing must feel good, as God does it. And are we not made in His image?”

“Can’t beat God, so become Him?” he asked softly and when Hannibal smiled, for the first time in his life, Will didn’t feel alone.

*****

A week after he’d proposed the idea of cooking dinner for the Lecters, Hannibal informed him that the coming Thursday evening would be ideal for them to come over. Will’s stomach was in knots at the thought of hosting them and lost two nights of sleep due to sweaty nightmares of being the Chesapeake Ripper, busy strangling faceless victims to death when he’d receive a phone call from the President, asking where he was. Finally he found a recipe for chicken and noodle casserole, an old standby that he’d loved as a child and so long as he didn’t burn it or use any weird ingredients, he was sure that Hannibal and Abigail would love it, too.

Will was able to leave the White House twenty minutes earlier than usual on Thursday and found his house and property swarming with various Secret Service agents preparing for the First Family’s arrival. They were at least subtle so that Freddie Lounds didn’t pick up on it, even thought Will knew it might do well for Hannibal’s image to be seen at a staffer’s home, doing something that couldn’t be viewed as snobbish. That had been one of the hurdles of the 2012 campaign—Hannibal was nothing like the average American. He expected refinement and good taste in a world of Big Macs and Honey Boo Boo. And while Will wasn’t one to put on airs, he did want the First Family to feel comfortable in his house so he called a professional house keeping service that Georgia recommended and had the entire house scoured from top to bottom.

While waiting for Hannibal and Abigail to arrive, he set the table, placing the still hot casserole dish on a cast iron trivet so that it didn’t sit directly on the table top. There was a small restaurant in town that Will knew had fairly reliable food, so rather than make a salad himself, he ordered one large enough to serve to three people and had arranged it in the largest mixing bowl he could find in the kitchen. Belatedly, he wondered if he should have included dinner rolls and he sure as hell didn’t have any wine, so he’d chilled a gallon of distilled water he’d bought down at the supermarket, slightly paranoid that the tap water at the house might taste off to the Lecters.

The plates were mismatched and the small bowls he’d set out for the salad were slightly chipped on the edge, but they were the only ones that didn’t have a christmas motif on them (he had no idea where he’d picked them up). He set two forks at each place setting, remembering that nearly anytime Hannibal served food, there were two forks. He’d set a few taper candles on the table that he’d dug out of his emergency supply bag and lit them; after five long seconds, he snuffed them out because they made him feel ridiculous. Candles immediately made a dinner feel like a date and that was the last feeling he wanted to have while at a table with Abigail. Or Hannibal, for that matter. He ran out to the back of the house, Huxley at his heels. He picked a few ferns and undergrowth that looked least likely to be a weed and brought them back to the house, sticking them into the only vase in the house, something that had been left behind by the house’s previous owners, blue with a fake Chinese motif that looked horribly out of place but better than an empty pickling jar. The candles were shoved back into his emergency supply bag.

‘This is a fucking mess,’ he thought to himself, anxiety rising. ‘I shouldn’t have asked him—I was
“upset, I wasn’t thinking clearly.’

“Mr Graham, they’ll be here in five minutes,” an agent in the living room told him.

“Great,” he murmured, wondering if there was any last minute thing he could do to make the night nicer.

But instead he sat on the front porch, waiting for the unmarked Secret Service vehicle that finally arrived as the sun was setting. He waved when the First Family walked up to the house, tentative, but Abigail gave him a large smile and waved back; the dogs were sitting very patiently in the living room, no doubt excited by all the new people in the house, but well trained to wait before they could investigate anyone. Will had already let them run around outside to burn off any extra energy, hoping to prevent any of them acting up with the President present.

“It’s uh…not very fancy,” Will admitted as he let his guests inside his house.

“It feels welcoming. Thank you for inviting us into your home.” The President had two paper gift bags in his left hand and held them out to Will. “We brought wine.”

“Thank you.”

“We also brought along wine glasses,” Hannibal added with a small smile.

Will can’t help but laugh, embarrassed. “How did you know?”

The wine had a name Will couldn’t pronounce and looked very expensive.

“Hey,” he quickly scolded the little terrier that was trying to jump on Abigail.

She grinned at Will and pulled a paper bag out of her purse. “We brought your dogs a gift as well. Sausage.”

Will allowed her to feed the small pack bits of the sausage while Hannibal spoke quietly with two agents who’d been stationed in the back field, and after he assured Will that everything was fine, suggested that they start dinner. Will was self-conscious on an unbearable level as Hannibal served their salads first and kept his mouth shut because he’d intended for the salad to be eaten with the casserole; he picked at the lettuce and tomatoes, instead offering stunted answers to the conversation that the other man was holding. When the casserole was served, Hannibal identified all the ingredients used by taste alone and Will hoped to a god he didn’t believe in that it meant he was enjoying it. Abigail asked politely for seconds (which immediately made him feel better about his cooking) and after everyone had finished eating, Will cleared the table and brought out the chocolate cake with coconut frosting that had been sitting in the fridge.

“I even have dessert,” he announced, setting the prized confection in the centre of the table. He’d bought the cake at a bakery located not far from the White House; fifteen dollars, but he hadn’t wanted to risk his own baking skills. “And I thought we could eat on the back porch.”

He’d already cleaned off the patio furniture that had come with the house, washing off the spider webs and dirt that had accumulated from neglect. Hannibal cut slices of the cake and Will ushered them out the back kitchen door. He and Abigail sat side by side on the bench while Hannibal took the rattan chair; Abigail pointed out constellations, giving both the common and latin names while Hannibal recited the mythology associated with each one; Will demonstrated his knowledge by explaining their usefulness for sailing.

It was almost ten when the Hannibal finally announced that, “Regrettably, we must leave for the
night”. He of course offered to help Will with the dishes, but Will waved him off, insisting he was more than capable of doing it himself. Abigail pet the rest of the dogs before the First Family was snuck back into the Secret Service vehicles and escorted home. Will washed the dishes and promised the dogs that he’d give them the rest of the sausage later. As he browsed over through his email and Tattle-Politic, he indulged in a third slice of the cake, suspecting he’ll just make himself sick. The extra agents had left, only his own personal detail remaining and alone in the house once more, Will went to bed, stomach full and mind humming, all thoughts of the Chesapeake Ripper tucked away.

///***///

Chapter End Notes

Art can be found here: http://ninjaninaiii.tumblr.com/post/78146555859/part-2-2-of-the-illustrations
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the busy morning at the White House; Hannibal was expected to deliver a speech before Congress about the importance of bipartisanship for the nation, which Will wanted to laugh at because it seemed so ridiculous. Ever since Hannibal had stepped into office, there had been nothing but bipartisanship to the point that Will was becoming suspicious that the Republicans were planning something. There was still friction and nasty words from the far right members of Congress that had maintained a steady course of action in line with the recently formed Tea Party Republican faction, but for the most party, there was an underlying smell of ozone in the air—lightening was waiting to strike and Will knew it was going to be an ugly storm.

Jack was leaning against the file cabinet in his office; he’d invited himself in while Will was repacking the President’s bag, trying to figure out how to add a few more White House pens to the front pocket without overstuffing and causing the front flap to lie strangely. It seemed that pens embossed with the White House logo was a popular handout that the interns on the Hill tried to collect, a stupid status symbol similar to holding a coffee cup that had the Starbucks logo on it. He wished it was a tradition that the President would refuse to continue—nothing was more irritating about this job than people trying to manipulate a twenty-five cent pen out of him.

“So you and Hannibal are playing detectives,” Jack commented as he started to open the file on the tenth victim.

Will grabbed the file out of Jack’s reach, adding it to the already overtaxed bag. “Something like that.”

“Anything interesting?” The casual tone to the other man’s voice suggested it wasn’t a casual conversation at all and Will worried that this headed to criticism about why he was looking at photos of dead bodies all day long when he should be thinking about Hannibal’s comfort.

“Not really,” Will lied.

“Your empathy doesn’t work on murder?”

Will bristled slightly. “I didn’t say that.”

The pens simply weren’t fitting and Will removed the second lint roller in the side pocket to make more room.

Jack started fishing for information again. “So this was Hannibal’s idea?”

“Why would it be mine?” Will snapped.


“I don’t understand what that means. How can he think too much, Jack?”

Will smirked at the sound of Hannibal’s voice directly behind the Chief of Staff, imagining the look of annoyance on Jack’s face.

“It’s just an expression, Hannibal,” Jack sighed. “Stop wasting time, Will. We’re expected at the
Capitol building in an hour.”

He left them and Hannibal entered the office—Will could see in the reflection of the iPad he was loading that the President had a smug smile. “Have you seen Miss Lounds latest article about today’s speech, Will?”

Will had read it over a late breakfast in the cafeteria, after catching the President reading Tattle-Politics often when they travelled; he found Hannibal’s interest in Freddie Lounds tabloid both amusing and curious, so he’d been reading it recently, too, in hopes to gain more insight as to why Hannibal enjoyed it. Today’s article had been titled, “Is President Lecter Holding Congress Hostage?”

“Yes and it would seem that Tattle-Politics commenters are having a hard time reaching a consensus if you’re a communist or a member of the New World Order.”

“Why can’t I be both?” Hannibal asked deadpan, and Will laughed. Hannibal smiled and Will returned his attention to the bag he was trying to pack. Before Hannibal left his office, he paused to look at the pens scattered on the desk and across the keyboard. “No pens today, Will.”

*****

She gave a friendly smile to Sutcliffe as she got up off the bed, pulling down her skirt and sweater. He was still breathing heavy, flopped over on his back, and she glanced down at the small wastebasket beneath her desk, using her foot to nudge it out onto the floor where he’d see it when he sat up. He’d been better than the previous boyfriends she fumbled around with, but not by much; it had been a rushed affair—twenty minutes that she could steal him away from the West Wing while her own handlers didn’t realise she was missing—and largely unsatisfying, but she’d smiled and looked pretty the entire time, which meant he didn’t know any better.

“I’m going to go shower. If you sneak out now, you probably won’t get caught,” she said quietly, still cautious about the wrong people seeing.

He smiled. “Probably.”

He sat up on the edge of the bed and pulled her back to him, giving her a quick kiss on the lips; she smiled against him, breathing in the scent of sex, sweat, and his cologne. His skin still flushed, he removed the used condom and threw it into the wastebasket; she almost made a comment about the fact that he wasn’t even trying to hide what they’d done properly, but instead kept her mouth shut—she could pretend to be an oblivious teenager for the time being and when he’d left, she’d drop a few crumpled tissues to cover it. She gave him one last smile before shutting the bathroom door quietly; now out of his sight, she rolled her eyes and dropped her bashful expression. She started the shower and quickly rinsed off the sweat and saliva off her skin, then dried off, listening at the door to see if he’d left and when she was confident she was alone in her bedroom, she opened the door.

She considered putting on all fresh clothes, but that would defeat the purpose of informing her father what she’d been up to, so she left the skirt and her underwear in the hamper but kept her sweater on and found linen trousers from one of her suit sets. No perfume—she didn’t want to hide her conquest. A new scarf was tied neatly around her neck and she checked her hair in the mirror after brushing her teeth. Satisfied with her appearance, she left her bedroom.

When she reached the West Wing, she found her father working in the Cabinet Room—the Oval Office was undergoing renovation that hadn’t been completed the night before and thankfully, he was all alone. She knocked on the door and waved at him through the glass and as expected he motioned for her to enter. Despite what he thought, the way he sniffed at the air was not subtle and
his smile disappeared, his eyes looking back down at the speech he was working on.

“I was just beginning to wonder where you’d run off to. Georgia said she was unable to find you.” He continued writing and she sat down across from him. To anyone else, he looked calm and vaguely disinterested with his paperwork, but she could see he’d been caught off guard by the assault of information he was now having to process and where it fit into the scheme of things.

“I had some business to take care of,” she said neutrally, then leaned forward, resting her head on one hand.

“How is Donald?” He said the other man’s name tightly, the only betrayal of his feelings to the other man.

She grinned, unable to maintain a neutral expression. “I’m worried about his presence here. I think he’s having fun in your White House, trying to get as much as he can before he leaves for greener pastures.”

Her father crossed out something on the paper, making a small note in the margin. “This is a stepping stone for him.”

“Yes.”

He finally glanced up her. “What do you suggest we do?”

“We should track who he’s talking to. Monitor what he involves himself in.” She suspected he might be feeding information to Freddie Lounds.

He nodded, seemingly satisfied with that answer. “What are your plans with him, Abigail?”

“I want to exploit the network of people he knows.”

He raised an eyebrow slightly. “Don’t play with him if you don’t have plan.”

She hoped he would have been a bit happier with that response, which left her to quickly clarify what she meant. “I know he could be useful, I just need to wait for the right time to use him. This was really the only opportunity to get him alone.”

“Be careful with what you are doing, Abigail,” he warned.

“I will be, I promise.”

She reached a hand out across the table and he hesitated for a moment, but then accepted it, squeezing her fingers gently. She was completely aware that she had just painted a very large target on Dr Sutcliff’s back and wondered how her father planned on using this to his advantage.

*****

It was a Friday night and Abigail had managed to convince her father to allow her to spend the night at Marissa’s. She hadn’t had a sleepover with her best friend in well over a year and she was thrilled to be out of the house, riding in the other teenager’s GranCabrio, music blasting so loud she was certain they were going to get a ticket for noise pollution (Marissa had laughed at that, driving faster on the freeway to force their details to catch up to them). Her mind was dancing with plans of watching movies late into the night and talking to one another, eating junk food and drinking the disgusting wine coolers Mrs Schurr kept stocked in the bar, lying awake and watching her friend sleep on the bed adjacent to hers.
When they didn’t take the turn off to the prestigious neighbourhood Marissa called home, Abigail turned to her uneasily. “This…isn’t the way to your house.”

“Duh, Abbs. We’re going to a party. I told your detail that we were going to Roger’s place tonight. They’re were cool with it because there’s security there.”

She raised an eyebrow. “The Luxembourg ambassador’s kid?”

“Yeah. His parents let him have their house’s dining hall to party in so he doesn’t sneak out. It’s going to be awesome.”

Abigail looked out the window, her smile fading. She really hated the parties Marissa so dearly loved. It was an incredibly mindless to spend time and the kids there were ridiculous; she’d tolerated this when she was younger because she was happy to do anything with her best friend, but she’d hoped that at seventeen they were both mature enough to stop going to them. Marissa seemed to revel in the chaos, however.

“Hey, I brought one of my dresses for you to wear. It’s in the back seat,” her friend offered her.

“It’s gold,” she complained, already feeling out of her element as she brought it around to her lap.

Marissa shifted gears. “Oh my god, just put it on. It’s the one with the high neck so you don’t have to wear your scarf.”

Abigail scowled but with the tinted out windows, she knew it wasn’t an unreasonable proposition, which led her to unbuckling her seatbelt. Slumping in her seat, she began undressing, wishing Marissa could let her hand off the steering wheel and grab her bare thigh instead, that they could go drive somewhere secluded and fuck in the driver’s seat. Almost naked, she slid the dress on, feeling the gold sequins scratching at her skin. Sitting back upright, she fastened the neck of the dress tightly at the back, letting her long hair cover it.

“Thank you,” she begrudged.

“Anytime!”

They continued driving to Embassy Row and Abigail steeled herself for a night of enduring.

*****

Abigail held a drink in her hand as she leaned against a very expensive piece of Dutch furniture that she recognised from a spread in last year’s Conde Nast Travel summer edition. Cîroc and sprite. She wrinkled her nose as she looked down at the drink. She’d tried to pretend it was wine for a while and lose herself in the world inside her mind, attempting to create a very cultured soirée in a museum she and her father had once visited in Rome, filling the largest gallery with all the people she could remember from dinner parties and events previous. But she couldn’t maintain artwork on the walls and the talking was becoming drowned out by the music’s heavy bass that was shaking her lungs. When she kept looking for her father, her ally, and while she couldn’t find him, she knew he was there. And she had no idea where Marissa had drifted off to.

Frustrated and tired of trying to make the party even remotely tolerable, she turned to look across the room where in the shadows waited her knight in shining armor. Making eye contact with the man to signal that she’d come to him, she wove her way through the crowd of disgusting, intoxicated teenagers, abandoning her drink in the hand of some unimportant girl grinding her body to the beat of the music.
“Barney,” she said, feeling small, needing to be rescued.

He looked down at her and she knew that he already understood what she wanted. “Yes, Abigail?”

“I want to go.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t want to go home. I want——” She thought for a moment, needing someone who wouldn’t need to make her feel more guilty for being sucked into this awful situation. “Take me to Will Graham’s place.”

“Okay.”

As he guided her out of the room, a hand on the small of her back, she fished out her cellphone and hit the fifth number on her speed dial.

“Hi, Will,” she greeted when the other line was picked up.

“Abigail?” His voice sounded groggy.

“Are you still awake?” She knew he was going to stay awake once she finished talking with him—she was only asking to be polite.

“Yes, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I mean, not really, but yeah.”

His voice sounded grounded now, edged with concern. “Where are you?”

“I’m at a shitty party,” she admitted as Barney opened the house’s front door for her.

“Do you need me to come pick you up?” He sounded worried and eager to rescue her.

She rolled her eyes. “I have Secret Service with me. I’ve got a ride.”

“Oh, of course.”

She immediately felt sorry for belittling him; she wasn’t some insolent teenager with an attitude problem. Carefully, she chose a gentler and more pitiful tone to speak with next. “Can I come over? I don’t want to go home.”

“Okay. Okay, I’ll be up.”

She closed her eyes in relief. “Thanks.”

“Anytime. I’ll see you soon.”

Once in the unmarked Secret Service vehicle that her agent had followed her in, she sighed and slouched against the cool seat. As they left the DC city limits, she looked at the man driving.

“Barney?”

His eyes flit up to meet hers in the rearview mirror. “Yes, Abigail?”

“My dad knew I was coming here, didn’t he?”
“He suspected.”

Her hands gripped her bare knees tightly. “And he said I could?”

“He said he trusted you to make the right judgement.” His eyes returned to the roads.

A primordial fear slithered out of her bones and under the surface of her skin; while her father was the centre of her universe, the one she trusted and held in the highest regard, she never failed to remember that once upon a time he’d made a decision for her to live and it had come at a price. Her hand went up to her neck, touching where the cloth covered her scar. She’d never believed in God, but she was certain if there was anything that could come close, it was the man she considered family. There was nothing that she feared more than disappointing the person she loved the most in the world. She was his heir and it was her duty, her destiny to be everything he wanted her to be.

She shuddered.

When she arrived at Will’s house, the lights were on downstairs in the living room. She could see his form moving behind the curtains and the front door opened. She left the SUV and hurried into the house, wanting to be around his dogs, only to be disappointed by their absence. Upstairs she could hear small movement and the sound of a dog collar’s tags jingling. It seemed he’d left them in his bedroom.

“Hi,” she greeted, trying to get him to look at her eyes, not wanting him to look at her eyes lest he saw everything she was capable of thinking.

He wore concern like it was his birthright. And maybe it was. “Are you okay?”

“I was at a party,” she said simply.

“Did something happen?”

“No, I just…” She hunched her shoulders in, uncomfortable. “That’s not really my thing, you know? I thought I was going to a sleep over with her.”

“Who?”

“Marissa.” She felt the word in her mouth like a silk gag.

“I’m sorry the night didn’t turn out the way you wanted,” he said sympathetically. She doubted he’d ever been invited to parties.

After a moment of worrying her lips between her teeth, she asked, “Would you make me something to drink?”

Will was terrible at hiding his expressions and seemed somewhat surprised at her request, but lead her into the kitchen regardless. “I have tea, coffee, hot chocolate—“

“Hot chocolate, please.”

He rummaged through one of his cupboards and then held out a packet of powdered drink. “With marshmallows?”

She found herself smiling—her father would rather cut off his own hand than serve her Swiss Miss. “Yes.”

“Let me clean the good mug.” She watched him reach up onto the meager shelf of mugs and select
something that had Woodstock and Snoopy on it, taking it over to the sink and rinsing it out. “Why didn’t you just go home?”

“I didn’t want to face Dad. He’s going to know where I was even without the Secret Service telling him.”

“He’ll be mad?” he brought the clean mug full of water over to the microwave, quickly opening the packet and adding the powder into the water—how fantastic.

She nodded, pushing down her fear. “Disappointed.”

“Can you tell him that you didn’t ask to go to the party?” he suggested.

She shrugged slightly. “Yeah, but then he’s going to want to know why I let her win.”

Confusion clouded his expression. “Win?”

She quickly corrected herself. “Why I didn’t just make her take me to her house for the sleep over.”

He watched the mug spinning in the microwave, saying nothing, and for a terrified moment she wondered if his empathy had allowed him a glimpse at the unfathomably large game she and her father were playing on a constant basis, if he could see the pieces moving slowly to capture him, if he could see that while Abigail regarded Marissa as an important piece on her board, no one else did. The worst thing she could do was allow a small figure dictate how she played. Those unwilling to sacrifice were destined to lose.

But as the microwave counted down from ten, it seemed that he’d actually been considering how to take care of her. Empathy.

“Do you want me to go with you to the White House?”

While she knew he’d never describe himself as courageous, his constant and unexpected bravery was something about him that she cherished. “Please?”

“Sure.” He removed the drink from the microwave and fished a spoon out of the dish rack, stirring the warm water and what of the hot chocolate mix that didn’t dissolve. It was probably going to taste stale—she couldn’t wait. “Drink your hot chocolate and I’ll get dressed. We can go whenever you’re ready.”

She accepted the mug. “Okay.”

As he ascended the stairs she couldn’t fight the giddy smile on her lips. While this latest development wasn’t something she’d planned for or expected, it could certainly be used to her advantage and possibly to her father’s. Now scheming as to the direction she wanted to take this, she pulled out her cellphone. It seemed only fair to warn her father what was happening.

He picked up after the first ring and she kept her voice quiet. “Hello, Dad.”

“Hello, Abigail.” His voice was calm; no doubt Barney had already told him where she was.

“I’m…I’m going to be coming home. Will’s bringing me. I think he’ll want to talk to you.” She couldn’t make promises and she knew better than to make plans over a line monitored by the Secret Service.

He seemed to understand what she wanted to say and replied. “Of course. We’ll talk when you get
home.” There was a pause and he added, “I love you, Abigail.”

The knot in her stomach loosened and when she spoke, she made sure every ounce of trust she had in him could be heard. “I love you, too, Daddy.”

*****

When Will came back downstairs, Abigail was sitting at the kitchen table, still drinking her cocoa. She looked young and while he was quite capable of viewing her as a clever, confident young woman who held one of the highest titles in the nation, she was still seventeen and prone to making bad decisions and dangerous mistakes. He didn’t like the thought of her at a party, where she could easily get slipped something in her drink and—

'STOP THINKING OF THOSE THINGS,' he ordered himself.

“Are you cold in that?” he asked, noting her bare arms.

“No, I’m fine.” She lowered her eyes. “Could we go in your car?”

“Sure. Let me clean off the front seat.” He motioned towards her hot chocolate. “When you finish that, just set it in the sink. I’ll wash it.”

“I’ll tell my detail I’m riding with you. Thanks.” He didn’t want to think that her eyes looked at him admiringly.

“You only have to ask, Abigail,” he promised, feeling very much like a father.

The drive back to Washington was quiet and he wanted to ask her a thousand different questions—how much did you drink, did you accept anything from a stranger, why didn’t you tell your friend you didn’t want to be there, where was this party, were anyone’s parents there, what if someone had alcohol poisoning, where was your friend in all this, you didn’t do any drugs, right?—but knew better than to open his mouth, so he just made soft huffing noises every time he aborted the opportunity to say something and adjusted the air conditioning. She spoke only once to tell him that she had called her dad.

When they pulled into the White House’s staff parking lot, he decided that she might be nervous to confront her dad alone and murmured, “I’ll come up with you.”

“Thank you.”

Together they walked, quietly greeted by late working employees and as they rode up the elevator, he couldn’t help but stare at her. He couldn’t imagine Hannibal being a man who yelled at his child—he couldn’t even picture Hannibal raising his voice—and with the way Abigail worshiped the ground he walked on, there probably hadn’t been many opportunities for her to violate his trust. No doubt notified of their arrival by the Secret Service, Hannibal was waiting for them in front of the doors to the living room, dressed in his pyjamas, a dressing gown atop that; somehow he still managed to look composed and Will fleetingly pondered if they had caught him before he had the chance to go to bed or if they’d woken him and he’d brushed his hair back to appear collected for company.

“Hello, Abigail,” he greeted in his typically serene tone, then acknowledged Will. “Will.”

Abigail was shifting uncomfortably beside Will and Hannibal intent focus remained on her. “I thought you were going to a sleep over, Abigail.”
“So did I. But Marissa took me to a party instead.”

“Where at?” The President sounded genuinely curious even thought Will suspected that he’d already asked the Secret Service where exactly his daughter had been.

“The Luxembourg Ambassador’s house.”

Hannibal nodded. “She has a son your age. Roger?”

“Yes.” She paused and then added. “I didn’t want to be there.”

“I know.”

Her tone suddenly took a desperate edge to it. “Please don’t be mad at the agents that took me. Barney didn’t realise I didn’t want to go. Marissa tricked them into thinking it’s what I wanted to do.”

“I’ll take that into consideration. Why don’t you go change and get ready for bed?” Hannibal suggested and Will exhaled. “You’ve had a long night.”

Abigail looked equally relieved. “Thank you.”

Will moved to stand beside Hannibal, watching as Abigail hurried towards her bedroom, leaving them alone.

“We are fortunate to have her in our lives, are we not?” The President’s voice was soft.

Will nodded. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“And you.” Will could feel the other man’s eyes on him. “She is my world.”

Will knew this of course, he’d always known that if Hannibal Lecter had ever had a weakness it was Abigail—she was the quickest way to put any pressure on him, the treasure of his empire. Hannibal’s hand came to rest comfortably on his shoulder.

“Thank you for bringing her home, Will.” Will looked over to the President, looking at his mouth instead of making eye contact. Eye contact would simply ruin whatever moment was occurring between them—satisfaction that Abigail was no longer at a party, relief that she was safe, that…The corner of Hannibal’s lips curled slightly and when he spoke, his voice was much lower. “I’m going to kiss you now.”

Will nodded again, unsure why he was so calmly accepting this—I dreamt of kissing you. Hannibal leaned forward and kissed the corner of Will’s mouth. Will’s eyes shut. Hannibal’s hand reached up to the back of Will’s head, tilting his head slightly so that their lips met easier. Will hadn’t kissed someone else in, what? Seven years? Six? Hannibal’s mouth tasted surprisingly enough like maraschino cherries and he smelt of good brandy.

The hallway was so silent and Will turned so that he could stand closer; his hands tentatively moved up to touch the soft silk of the President’s dressing gown. It started so wonderfully chaste, nothing more than the President’s soft lips pressed against his and then his need for contact grew, kissing insistently, pulling at the silk to bring the other man closer.

Will’s eyes opened in flashes—Hannibal’s eyes staring mercilessly at him—and tried not to let his mind read anything he saw. Every time that Abigail’s been involved, we find ourselves touching. She makes us vulnerable. She makes us weak. She makes us feel emotions—And then Hannibal’s tongue
was tracing along his and a single hand was on the back of his neck, reminding him immediately of the night Abigail killed the intruder on the Vice President’s Maryland property, the way his hand had felt as he talked him through his panic attack. Will found his hands were pushing them apart, gently, but firmly.

“I…I should probably go home,” he admitted, keeping his eyes planted on his left thumb.

“Yes,” the other man agreed, but made no move to step away or remove his hands from Will’s neck. “Thank you for bringing Abigail home.”

Will said nothing, keeping his eyes anywhere but the President’s face and nodded. He knew he was blushing, that if he looked up, he’d probably start smiling and stuttering and making a complete ass of himself, so he took a step back and then walked to the staircase, not daring to wait for an elevator with the other man watching him. Will knew he was fleeing, that he hadn’t even said ‘goodbye’ or ‘goodnight’ and that the President hated rudeness, but Will could hardly live in his own skin, half of him absolutely terrified at how he’d reacted to kissing a man, the other half happy to have his own questions about how the President viewed him quieted.

Will drove back to Wolf Trap, humming with energy. His mind was a million different points of connexion, deep blades of Hannibal's reflection embedded under his skin. A broken mirror. A temporary reflection. Jesus, was this his version of romance? It was terrible. Hannibal probably recited poetry. Or Kahlil Gibran quotes. Or what if this wasn't going to be something romantic and he'd misinterpreted the kiss? What if this was just a passing two-people-in-a-workplace situation? He felt sick. Will Graham, the Monica Lewinsky reboot for 2013.

When he got home he went immediately upstairs, washing his face and changing back into the night clothes he'd abandoned on the bathroom floor. When he left the bathroom, he saw his BlackBerry was blinking and he grabbed it, hoping he wasn't going to have to drag himself back to the White House yet again tonight. His cheeks flushed at the simple thought of Hannibal’s lips, wanting more than anything to feel their tongues together and he saw the President was the one who had messaged him.

*Will, we are having brunch at 10 am tomorrow. We would be happy if you attended.*

Hope blossomed in him, relief, and he quickly typed back, *Yes thank you*

*We shall see you in the morning then. Goodnight.*

*Goodnight*

Will set the phone back down on the nightstand and gave a shaky sounding exhale. He stared at the ceiling and licked his lips, imagining the taste of maraschino cherries as he closed his eyes and thought of somewhere safe for his mind to retreat as he fell asleep. He walked down a boat dock in Biloxi, past the various boats and their crews, his worn and dirty Keds making little noise on the weather worn wood. Instinct told him to pause at a tired looking boat painted an unappealing blue; he shielded his eyes against the sun and saw that on the deck stood an older man, who waved a hand at Will. ‘Say, son—you wouldn’t know how to fix a boat motor, would you?’

Will smiled and came aboard…

****

“Good morning, Will,” Abigail greeted as she walked down the hallway to the kitchen and he flinched, caught by surprise that she’d snuck up on him. She’d been waiting for him to arrive upstairs
for three minutes now, following the instructions of her father to let him know she was all right.

“Good morning.” His brow knotted slightly. “I hope you’re not in too much trouble.”

She shrugged slightly. “I’m completely forbidden to go out with Marissa anymore.”

“At least you’re not grounded.”

“Dad would never ground me.” That was unthinkable. “He wasn’t mad at you right? For bringing me home?”

“No. No.”

“Good. I didn’t want to make you an unwitting accomplice,” she joked

Will’s brow furrowed somewhat and she realised too late that he was an unwitting accomplice already in the death of Nichols.

“Um, ready for breakfast?” she asked, allowing her voice to sound sad and small.

The parental look of protecting returned to his face and he nodded. “Yeah.”

Her father was already waiting in the kitchen, cooking up an impressive brunch for the three of them to enjoy together; her father looked up from the fresh pastries that they’d cooked that morning after the sun rose, smiling at the sight of the other man. “Good morning, Will.”

“Good morning, Hannibal,” he said quietly.

She grinned behind Will’s back; her father had already told her of last night’s events and she was pleased to see Will fidgeting in nervousness, shy and bashful posturing that universally indicated that he was receptive to whatever relationship her father had offered him. There was a tray of Bellini cocktails waiting to be served and while her father’s body language wasn’t any different than it usually was, his wording had taken on a playful manner.

“I hope you are in the mood for something sweet—“

The moment was already interrupted by Jack entering the kitchen. “Hannibal.”

Everyone turned to look at him and Abigail noted the iPad he held in his hand, believing for a moment that there was footage of a terrorist attack or something otherwise horrific, but instead she caught a glimpse of the bold red Tattle-Politics page banner with the black bold words beneath it:

FIRST LADY PARTY GIRL

She blanched and hurried over to her father’s side to see the damage that had been done.

“Someone took the photo at the party,” Will voiced as they crowded around the iPad.

“Let me make a statement on Twitter,” she said quickly to her father’s Chief of Staff

“Jack and I will handle this,” her father replied, looking over the article as Will tentatively placed his hand over hers in an attempt to comfort.

“I didn’t even have anything to drink. Look, I’m just standing here,” she protested, pointing at the blurry part of her hand.
He closed the iPad. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of this.”

She could see her father’s annoyance and grit her jaw, lowering her eyes. There was nothing she could say or do to fix this and she hated herself for not being stronger, for not turning Marissa down. Her phone buzzed, signaling that her best friend had just texted her.

“Are you going to see who it is?” Her father’s eyes betrayed that he knew who it was contacting her, but as with everything, this was a game to see how well she could play along, so she obliged and read the message silently.

{I’m so sorry}

///***///
Chapter End Notes

Art can be found here: http://ninjaninaiii.tumblr.com/post/78146555859/part-2-2-of-the-illustrations
As Hannibal removed his headphones, his daughter smiled hopefully at him. “So? What do you think?”

“I believe you used the phrase ‘avant-garde’ to describe Mr Creator’s music.” He handed her iPod back to her and outlined what it was about the music he didn’t care for; he believed very strongly that children needed to have reasoning behind decisions explained to them so that there could be no arguing later. “The lyrics were rather violent and made reference to selling drugs; additionally, the music lacked any complexity.”

Her smile began to fade. “Are you sure you listened to all of it?”

“Perhaps you should have picked a different song,” he said kindly, hoping she would think of that the next time she wanted to influence him. “He seems to have anger issues with women and I wouldn’t be comfortable with you attending a concert that promoted those types of neuroses.”

He knew she wanted to go to the concert and had very thoughtfully asked in advance of July so that the Secret Service would have enough time to prepare for her presence in such a crowded, chaotic scene. He had become cautious of anything that seemed to feed her aggression towards women.

“Please, I’d really like to go.”

“I’m afraid I must say no.” There was never room for disagreement in his world and he suggested an alternative. “Perhaps you and I could spend that evening together instead.”

He could see she was disappointed, but she still smiled and nodded. He touched her hand reassuringly before she left.

*****

Admittedly, things had been…strange between himself and Hannibal the past few days. Neither had verbally acknowledged what had happened since he’d brought Abigail back home and while he knew it wasn’t healthy to simply bottle up emotions as to what had happened between them, but saying it aloud meant there was a possibility that the other man could say “it meant nothing” or “I’d been drinking”, neither of which were answers he wanted to think about. Twice he’d accidentally encountered Hannibal in the private corridor that his office was located on and he’d never felt more awkward in his whole life. They’d circled one another slightly, Will giving an embarrassed laugh, wanting to reach out, wanting to touch, but not having the nerve to make the first move. He’d left quickly after that under the excuse of retrieving new supplies for the bag he carried for the President and each time, Hannibal had merely nodded, keeping a respectful distance between them.

But there wasn’t the expected tension like what he felt with Alana—it wasn’t the green skies before a tornado, it was the building breeze before the sails of a boat could be filled.

They sat across from one another in the Cabinet Room; a tour was being held in the Oval Office and when Will had offered for Hannibal to use his office, Hannibal had suggested they work together at the table so often used to host important conferences; Will knew it was pointless for him to be there, but wasn’t going to argue, simply happy to be so close to the other man. There was a comfortable silence between them while they worked—Jack had brought Will letters of people who wanted the
sentences of family members pardoned or granted clemency, and Hannibal had finished a formal response to a propose trade agreement, which meant he was now reading over the letters with Will.

The stack of rejected letters grew.

An usher entered the room with a tray that held a water pitcher, fresh glasses, and an arrangement of small cakes, setting it on the table and then removing the previous tray. Hannibal thanked her and Will mumbled something he hoped sounded grateful. After the door shut behind her, Will reached out and straightened the tray.

“Uh, I heard that you’ve reached a record number of death threats made against a first term President,” he stated, eyeing one of the little cakes that had a brush of edible gold across the top.

“Is that so, Will?” Hannibal poured them both glasses of water.

“Pretty impressive. All because of the Marriage Equality Bill.” Will couldn’t believe that he was flirting with someone about death threats they were receiving, but as with all things, he didn’t have a real exit strategy, so he nervously added, “You know, because they say that you know you’re doing your job when you have people pissed off.”

But Hannibal smiled at him as though he’d said something so absolutely clever that Will was able to breathe again. “I am aware of the saying.”

Will looked back down at the table to the President’s BlackBerry, which was buzzing between them. While he still found it strange to answer another person’s phone, it was his job and Hannibal wasn’t reaching for it. Will took the hint that it was his responsibility still and picked it up, remaining silent as the person on the other end announced themselves first so that Will had the option of hanging up before divulging who the phone line led to.

“President Lecter’s private line, how may I help you?” he said when the line cleared. Caroline, he mouthed and Hannibal nodded once. “Hold please and I’ll transfer you to the President.”

He held the phone out and Hannibal cupped Will’s hand between his for a moment as he swept the BlackBerry into his grasp, his fingers stroking along Will’s palm. Will felt the shiver up his spine and he rolled his shoulders in, pulling his hand back; but he wasn’t upset, simply overwhelmed. Hannibal smiled at him and brought the phone to his ear.

“Hello, Caroline. How are you?”

Closing his fingers over his palm as if it could hold in the feeling of being touched, Will smiled back up at the other man. Perhaps there wasn’t a need for words.

*****

It was just past three in the morning, the beginning of Amrit Vela, and Hannibal sat before the shrine staring at the small picture of his sister. His sleep had been plagued with dark memories, screams and pleas that made him nauseous and tremble. It was rare when his past overwhelmed his dreams, as it usually took a high emotional trigger; the problems overseas in Syria and Iran had been multiplying and after weeks of being bombarded by images of war and suffering, classified information that he only saw in the Situation Room, he found his dreams haunted by memories he’d so carefully kept locked away.

He closed his eyes and opened them within his memory palace. Walking through the marble corridors well lit, he found the winding staircase that led to a lower level, though not any less pleasant. The scents of the kitchen from his childhood house in Paris wafted invitingly and he
entered the familiar hallway that lead to the particular room he was most inclined to visit when he found his mind in a state of unrest.

The pleasant woman who’d been employed as the family’s cook stood behind the heavy butchering table in the centre of the kitchen. Her flat shoes moved with a soft shuffle as she floured the array of greased metal cake pans arranged on the tabletop. He had regarded her as his first teacher, the one who’d taught him about the art of cooking, about patience, about the joys of language.

“Hello, Pia.”

She smiled and motioned to him as though he was still the young boy he’d been when he last saw her. “Hannibal, come make cake with us.”

As he stepped into the kitchen, he could see that his small daughter was standing behind the table as well, holding a bowl in her arms; she didn’t look a day older than the moment they’d first met.

“Hello, Daddy,” she greeted politely, her focus on the task at hand.

He came to stand beside her. “Hello, Abigail. Are you helping Pia?”

She looked up to him, one eye ice blue and the other warm brown. “She’s letting me make the pettinice.”

Curious as to her ability to create the fondant icing, he dipped his finger along the edge of the bowl, bringing the sugar up to his lips.

“Hannibal, don’t sneak sweets. I can see you.” Pia chastised. “Help Mischa with the mixing.”

“Very good,” he praised her as he watched her using a fork to stir the sticky topping, just as Pia had taught them as children.

“Hannibal, don’t just stand there,” Pia said with a sigh, though before she could become exasperated, she looked him over and asked, “Oh, are you hungry?”

“Yes, Pia.”

“Would you like fruit, Hannibal?”

“Yes, Pia. Thank you.”

Taking him by the hand, she led him to a low table beside the wine racks. “Anything for you, little one.” She patted his cheek affectionately before setting a plate of cut fruit in front of him. “Eat up so you can help your sister.”

Hannibal was unable to place what the fruit was—every time he studied it, its features seemed to shift, a fluid change of existence. But Pia would never serve him anything he shouldn’t eat and so he raised the first slice to his lips, biting it in half. It was sweet, much like the syrup found in canned fruit, but had no distinct flavour, remaining abstract.

“I’m doing this to myself,” he said aloud, trying to control the fruit into something familiar. “I am upset.” It was safe to admit these things here in his mind and he turned to look at the woman who was pouring batter into the cake pans.

“May I tell you something, Pia?” he asked as he tasted what was left of the fondant on his finger.

She smiled as she floured the inside of the cake pans. “Yes, Hannibal.”
“I wish you could have returned to America with me. I missed you very much when I was brought to my uncle,” he confessed. It would have been so much easier to be taken care of by someone who’d known that he didn’t want toys or Bedelia to make him feel better.

“You must know that I missed you, too?” She didn’t look away from her work and he knew she was not being cruel to deny him her gaze.

“I’m sorry I never tried to get in contact with you.”

“You were learning how to live again.”

“I didn’t try to find you. And when I did look for you, you had already expired to lupus.” He looked at the fruit on the plate, still trying to decipher what it was that he was being fed. There were no answers and so he looked back to her. Pia always had answers. “I did love you.”

And he had, in his own way. He’d always been very respectful to her and appreciative of what he’d learned from her.

She glanced over at him. “And I loved you very much. You and Mischa were my world and always shall be.” As she brought her attention back to the cakes she was making, she reminded, “Hannibal. I am a collection of memories and carefully calculated responses and actions. You know I’m not real. Of all that you remember about me, would I ever be upset with you?”

“You wouldn’t.” He felt petulant. “But you’re dead now and I do not have the option of telling you this in person.”

“And whenever you are upset and retreating as close to your childhood as you are willing to come, you always find your way here, to mourn. Why don’t you simply come to eat cake? Or sing?”

He frowned. “Why do you always give me this answer?”

Her dark eyes were always able to look right through him. “You know why, Hannibal.”

Her hand careful pulled his head against her side and he leaned into the feeling of her softness, relaxing as he dwelt on memories of clinging one hand unconsciously to her apron as she moved about the kitchen, cooking and telling him stories about the world outside Paris. Pia’s kitchen was the only place where the horrors out the outside world could never permeate, where meat came from game or fowls, never people. It was a safe and comforting place, where he was always welcome. He looked down to see that his hand was indeed clutching her apron and he returned his gaze to her round and beloved face, watching her eyes flick down to the plate.


She returned to the cakes at the table, which had risen and baked in their pans.

“Perfect,” Hannibal commented.

“I know. You learnt from the best.” Pia gave him a teasing smile.

*****

“We aren’t going to the kitchen, Will.” Hannibal gestured for Will to follow him to the east end of the Residence. “This way, please.”
“What are we doing?” he asked, his tone wary.

“You are to be fitted for a suit.”

“What? Why?”

Hannibal had actually not planned for this particular surprise until yesterday. “I have taken the liberty of purchasing tickets for the three of us to attend a concert featuring songs La Vita Nuova performed by the original cast.”

“Oh…” Will wasn’t sophisticated enough to understand what he was talking about, his only feeling of being impressed emphasised by the fact he’d spoke in Italian. It was sweet.

“You will enjoy it. It is one of my favourite operas,” he assured him, already seeing that the younger man was looking for some way out of the arrangement.

“Well, I can’t exactly go in this, I guess.”

Hannibal didn’t want to glance at the horrible synthetic wool jacket and dark plaid Will wore beneath it. “No.”

They entered the Treaty Room in the Residence, a room he didn’t use for his own personal needs; inside a there was a smaller man, dressed impeccably standing beside a full length mirror that had been brought in from a guest room.

“Mr Trotter, so nice of you to come.” He shook hands with the man who’d been keeping him well dressed for almost twenty years.

“President Lecter, I’m honoured you still find me of service to you.”

“You are the only one I would trust with the matter,” he praised then motioned to Will. “This is Will Graham, my personal assistant.”

Trotter took a step forward and shook Will’s hand. “A pleasure to meet you Mr Graham.”

“Nice to meet you,” Will murmured and Hannibal could tell he was wishing for his glasses.

“My assistant is in need of something formal. He shall be joining Abigail and I at the Meyerhoff.” Hannibal motioned for Will to stand on the low wooden box that had been positioned in front of the mirror.

Trotter nodded. “For the performance of cast of La Vita Nuova.”

Will already seemed uncomfortable, his shoulders rolling in and continuously glancing towards the door, wanting an escape. The tailor courteously pretended he didn’t notice and Hannibal focused on the important task of listing what he required for the tuxedo—the number of buttons, the cloth decision for the lapels, the fit, the weight of the material. Hannibal could tell the discussion was going over the younger man’s head, but he was quiet and patient and therefore Hannibal would reward him for his good behaviour. Will stood still and allowed the tailor to take his measurements while Hannibal made conversation about various autumn and winter styles of suits he’d seen advertised.

“How soon can we expect it?” he asked when Trotter tucked his notebook and measuring tape away. The concert was in three weeks, which the astute man no doubt already knew.
Trotter looked hesitant, studying Hannibal’s face to gage exactly how to reply, but he offered him no clues. “I…have the option of tailoring a ready made formal suit, which I could provide to you at the end of the week. A tuxedo, however…two and a half weeks if I personally rush the order through.”

Hannibal knew he was asking a nearly unreasonable miracle to have a full tuxedo made in such a short amount of time and was apprehensive it might not be finished in time, knowing it would be wisest not to risk not having an alternative. available at all.

“If it wouldn’t be an inconvenience to you, I would prefer to have both options.”

At this, Will finally spoke up. “You don’t have to…”

Hannibal ignored his protest, more confident in his decision. “He is in the process of rebuilding his wardrobe for formal events.”

Trotter smiled. “Well, I am always happy to help a friend of my favourite customer.” They shook hands again.“I shall stay in touch with you, President Lecter.”

“Thank you, Mr Trotter.”

Trotter extended a polite nod to Will, sparing him any more physical contact. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr Graham.”

The favoured tailor left the room and Will hopped off the box; Hannibal was feeling particularly satisfied with his handiwork and took the opportunity to examine himself in the mirror, straightening his suit of any creases he imagined.

Will finally broke the silence. “I…you need to tell him that I can only take one suit right now.”

Hannibal paused and looked over at the younger man. “Will, they are gifts.”

“No, no it’s one thing to accept food or a new pen cup—“ Hannibal flinched at that—he’d given him a 19th century vase from his own personal collection, not a ‘pen cup’, “—but getting something that’s, that’s really expensive is—I just can’t, okay?”

“You’ve already accepted a shirt and tie, Will. Why stop there—“

“Because I can’t get you anything in return,” Will interupted, his words tinged with panic.

Hannibal had never had someone reject a gift from him and waited as the younger man found his glasses and slipped them on. It seemed Will was his first, a very poetic injustice to his limited understanding of selflessness. A delicate ego, ever the boy arriving to school in rags and hand-me-downs.

“You don’t want to be beholden to me.”

“Beholden. No, I don’t want to be beholden to you,” Will hissed, his hands curling into fists.

“My dear Will,” Hannibal wondered for a moment if the other man might strike out at him physically, “they are gifts. I do not expect anything in return from you.”

“Fine. Can I go?”

For approximately two seconds, Hannibal imagined sinking his teeth in that belligerent tongue, wondering how sharp it would taste, but cast the thought aside for later and nodded his head in
dismissal, watching the other man storm out of the room.

*****

Will did not attend lunch.

*****

Hannibal had finally located Will in his office a few hours after a phone conference with Speaker Boehner. When he entered, Will was standing in the centre of the room with an envelope in one hand. He was also wearing his glasses, positioned in the precise manner used to hide his eyes.

“I went to the bank. I wasn’t sure—I didn’t know how much they cost. It’s eleven hundred dollars.”

Had he any less self control, Hannibal would have burst out laughing. Eleven hundred dollars certainly didn’t cover the ready-made, let alone the tuxedo and rush fees. But he kept his face neutral and simply kept his eyes on the growing expression of shame on Will’s face; his attempt at regaining his dignity was failing miserably and Hannibal considered allowing it to break him, to watch the younger man become humiliated fully in his presence, but that was something he could explore at a later point. Right now, Will needed a competent father, a gentle lover, an understanding friend.

Hannibal removed the envelope from Will’s hand and set it down on the desk. The delightful empath’s eyes were very pointedly looking beyond Hannibal’s shoulder and Hannibal took a step closer, wishing to convey what his actual intentions were. While many things he did were manipulative and calculatingly so, clothing was one of the rare gifts he gave to associates and family that had no motive other than adornment. It wasn’t possessive. It wasn’t sexual. It was simply his desire to see the people in his world well dressed, that he had thought about them and wanted something nicer for them.

Will hadn’t shied away from his presence and Hannibal brought a hand to run down Will’s arm, letting his fingers curl under his elbow and then clutch at his hand. Too much physical contact between them would certainly backfire and he was careful to keep his touches from becoming anything that could be considered sexual—Will didn’t need to mistake the formal wear as an advance. Hannibal had much more tact than that.

“Not used to gifts, are you.” It was an observation anyone could make, but by voicing, he was forcing Will to acknowledge it.

“They’re expensive,” Will muttered.

“I don’t want your money. You worked for it. You earned it. You’re not stealing from my pocket. I am not buying your time. Or favours.” Hannibal rubbed Will’s knuckles with his thumb, causing his eyelids to flutter for a moment. “I am giving you them as gifts, Will. And I thought you would appreciate things that are not only beautiful, but practical.” He ducked his head slightly to get better in the younger man’s line of sight so that he could see his careful smile. “Am I incorrect?”

Will blinked behind his glasses and he whispered, “Just…I don’t want you to buy me anything from now on.”

Oh, sweet boy. “I cannot promise anything, but I shall try to respect your wishes.”

Hannibal felt Will ease slightly, then reposition himself to lean in for a kiss, an apology for his behaviour; naturally Hannibal welcomed this and turned his face slightly to accommodate him. Shy, someone who’d perhaps only ever had sticky and fumbling kisses in high school, and brief, unsatisfying encounters in college. The kissing deepened and Hannibal could read the desperation so
easily it was painful; anyone so starved of human contact couldn’t help but gorge on what was offered, so Hannibal again made sure he was not the one initiating anything, letting Will take.

When Will finally pulled away, his lips were swolen and wet and his eyes wouldn’t look at Hannibal’s for any longer than a second.

“So the opera…is it, uh…” Will took a step back.

“A date, Will?” He allowed some of his amusement to show. “An outing. With Abigail.”

Will did not hide his disappointment. “Oh.”

Hannibal was quick to assure him that he was not simply a tagalong for the President. “But it will be better enjoyed with your presence.”

“I’ve never been to…” he trailed off yet again.

“It’s always nice to try new things.”

Will seemed to remember his manners. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“Of course.”

Hannibal left without the money.

*****

Due to a bout of mononucleosis at the beginning of the 2012 school year, Marissa fell behind in classes and couldn’t graduate with the senior class of 2013; while Sidwell Friends allowed a delayed graduation for students that couldn’t graduate it was frowned upon and mostly discouraged because it altered the school’s ranking. Though money always seemed to smooth over that problem. During Marissa’s home rest, her parents had decided to donate new tennis courts to the school, to which the school replied, ‘Would Marissa like to participate in the summer graduation programme?’ So Marissa was slated for graduation at the end of August along with three other students who had been unable to catch up by the end of the school year. Abigail was planning on getting permission from her father to have a celebratory getaway at Camp David with Marissa.

And thankfully, it seemed her father was allowing her more freedom when it came to her best friend. For the first time in nearly a year, Abigail had been allowed to visit over at the Schurr’s house for the afternoon. Abigail was let in by the housekeeper, being told that Marissa was up in her bedroom; after telling Barney he’d been given permission by the Schurrs to hang out in the game room and eat anything he wanted in the kitchen, Abigail bounded up the stairs to the second largest bedroom in the house.

“Abigail, you’re supposed to tell me when you have a boyfriend,” her friend scolded the second Abigail burst through the door.

Abigail made a face. “What?”

Marissa handed over her iphone which was opened to the Tattle-Politics app. “Freddie says you were out spending the afternoon with Will Graham. You went shopping, you had lunch, and here’s a picture of you two laughing over some seriously greasy looking chili fries.”

“Oh that fucking stupid cunt! I am going to kill Freddie, I swear to god!” Abigail’s voice was a snarl as her eyes raked over the phone now in her hands.
Marissa’s lips curl in an amused sneer. “He’s, like, twenty years older than you. I mean, he’s kinda hot in a scruffy older guy way, but seriously, couldn’t you find someone else?”

“I’m not dating him,” Abigail snapped.

Gleefully, her friend tapped at the screen—the photo showed both of them laughing. “This is dating.”

“I’m not.”

Marissa snatched the phone back and read over the article. “You spent, like, three hours with him around town!”

Abigail had begged Will to take her to some of the crappy food trucks around the city on pursuit of junk food; she wanted it to be their first hunt for food together and they’d split a pastrami sandwich, a paper tray of chili fries, and both indulged in milkshakes. It had all been too rich and she’d had to throw it all up later, but so, so worth it. She’d been in disguise and they’d travelled in his station wagons with discreet Secret Service escorts. Honestly, she never thought that she’d be recognised. No one on the streets had known who they were—how the fuck had Freddie found them?!

“Marissa, I’m not dating him.”

Marissa leaned in, always loving a good scandal. “Is he a good kisser?”

“Stop.”

“Your dad is going to kill him. No way he’s going to let his little girl sleep with his PA.”

“Stop!” she insisted a little louder.

“I’m just pissed you didn’t tell me! I’m your best friend and you haven’t said one thing to me, which is totally bullshit, because I tell you everything—“

Abigail grabbed her friend violently by the shoulders.

“Marissa—shut up! He’s not my boyfriend, I swear!” She leaned in and hissed so that there was no possible way anyone else could hear what she was about to say next. “He’s dating my dad.”

Marissa stared at her. “What?”

Abigail released her tight grip from the other girl. “Will’s, like—he just wants to spend time with me, because we want to be a family.”

“Oh my god. Oh my god.” Maria sat back, looking stunned and then quickly clarified, “Oh, I don’t care if your dad is gay or bisexual or whatever. It’s just a lot to take in. Didn’t he have a girlfriend a while back?”

Abigail nodded, knowing wholly that her father had never actually ‘dated’ anyone ever; it was much easier just to lie. “Yeah, back when I was little. He hasn’t been with anyone in a really long time, though.”

“Seriously, Abigail. I don’t care one way or another. It’s 2013,” her friend assured her.

It was rare when Abigail could share a secret with her and she felt a tightness in her chest uncoil. “Thanks.”
“What are best friends for?” Marissa opened the minifridge beside her bed and pulled out two beers, handing one over to her after popping the lid off with a church key tucked in with the pens on her desk. Abigail thought absently of the cork seals for the home brewed beer at home. “So is Will cool?”

“I like him a lot. He’s really nice.”

“Do you want him to be your stepdad?”

Abigail felt a proud smile come to her lips and she lowered her eyes slightly, suddenly shy of it all. She knew how much she meant to him and she couldn’t wait to have it on a permanent basis. Having her father was what made her feel powerful, but adding Will to the mix was what had made her see that there had been a space in her and her father’s lives.

“He wants to adopt me. He’d just be my dad.”

“Would you need to give them different names?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll just call them both ‘Dad’. Dad One and Dad Two.”

They both smirked. After a few minutes of drinking their beers, Marissa asked, “So when can I meet Will?”

She hadn’t actually considered this. “Um, soon hopefully. You’ll like him. He’s, like, one of my favourite things.”

“People,” Marissa send over the top of her beer bottle.

“Hmm?”

“He’s one of your favourite people. Not things,” Marissa corrected.

“Yeah. Right.” Abigail tucked a lock of stray hair behind her ears. “People.”

“So he takes you shopping?”

“Oh, we were picking up a suit.” She didn’t want to go into details.

“Are you going to hang out with him all the time?”

Abigail shrugged—what belonged to her father belonged to her as well, but she knew there was a careful balance that needed to be maintained during this courtship stage. Will and her father weren’t even official at this point. “I’m trying to give him and Daddy time alone. If he starts staying over, I’ll probably spend the night at Aunt Bee’s. She and I could set things on fire.”

Marissa laughed and Abigail smiled, choosing not to admit that she and Aunt Bee actually indulged in pyromanic tendencies quite often when they were alone. Many important family paintings had seen their end this way.

Marissa took her phone back, turning off the screen. “Are you excited? Not that your dad’s getting laid, but that you’re going to have two parents?”

“Yeah. A lot. Will…is so special to us. He’s like…” Abigail gave a happy sigh, “perfect.”

Marissa nodded, appraising the photo of Will. “So…your dad couldn’t find someone better dressed?”
Abigail laughed.

*****

“Well, this happened.”

Hannibal barely looked up from his typing to acknowledge the Crawfords, already well aware of the article Freddie Lounds had posted to her site. “Then you must spin it.”

Jack snorted. “Well, yeah, we’re gonna spin it, but do you see what kind of a problem this is?”

“I do. Have the security around Will’s house increased. I do not want paparazzi harassing him.” Hannibal looked up from his laptop.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Jack looked to his wife for assistance.

Bella Crawford, ever composed, understood that he deserved respect. “Hannibal, this is serious. No one wants to think your daughter is being taken advantage of by a man more than twice her age. No one wants to think that the man closest to you is having an affair with the First Lady. It isn’t just bad business for the White House, but it could become a problem later if they are spotted together repeatedly.”

“She knows.”

“Is he…” Bella seemed conflicted as to what exactly was happening between Will and the Lecters.

As alway, Hannibal offered half truths. “He is exploring fatherhood. I shall not deny him the opportunity.”

The Crawfords both looked relieved that nothing romantic was happening between the two and Bella quickly told him, “I’m happy for her. But we require discretion.”

“I understand.” And he did.

Bella released a statement during the following morning’s daily press conference where she’d chided the MSNBC White House correspondent for such a silly question about Will and Abigail’s relationship, because no, wasn’t it obvious that they were just two people happy to be out of the White House and indulging in food truck snacks? The President and First Lady would be attending a concert in Baltimore later in the month and Will had been on an errand, generously allowing the teenager to accompany him.

The matter was promptly dropped by serious media.

*****

Freddie Lounds stood in an underground parking garage that had no surveillance cameras, ears perked for the sound of any cars approaching and a stun gun in one hand in case anyone came across her and wanted trouble. This was a shittier part of Washington DC and the dark space was muggy, smelling of cigarettes and piss, and she could hear loud college students a level up on the sidewalk doing a late night bar crawl, screaming and laughing. She had about ten more minutes for her source arrived—always the same time every week at constantly rotating locations—and she tucked some errant hair behind her ear as she waited patiently, wondering if her source would show. Anyone else, she might not have been faithful to their scheduled meet-ups, but this was her best, favourite, and most destructive, the white whale all journalists hunted after.
The black car she’d hoped for pulled into the parking garage and Freddie slipped her stun gun into her jeans pocket, smiling as the car pulled up in front of her and a Secret Service agent stepped out of the front to open the back door. A very elegant and enigmatic woman stepped out and Freddie smiled as though they were friendly with one another.

“Vice President Du Maurier, it’s nice to see you again. I love how classic our little rendezvous are. Parking garages, empty parks, abandoned buildings…you sure know how to get my blood pumping, Madame Vice President.”

Bedelia looked her over and Freddie felt her skin prickle. When she’d been seven, Freddie had visited a zoo with an exhibit on crocodiles. The name came from the Greek *krokodilos*, meaning ‘worm of the stones’; she thought that the crocodiles were creepy—their eyes held no emotion and their teeth were always showing. Crocodiles, the tour guide had told her, were the most social reptiles. Even though they didn’t form social groups, they would congregate and tolerate one another while feeding or basking, forming hierarchies amongst themselves. Freddie had looked at the beasts in disgust, thankful that they didn’t exist anywhere in her life.

At least, that was what she believed until she met a young senator from Maryland. Bedelia Kennedy had dead eyes and a smile that showed her teeth, wearing crocodile leather on her shoes and purse. Bedelia was no lion—she was something reptilian waiting under the surface of the water, sure to bite the moment anything got to close and she was hungry.

Bedelia handed over a file to her, saying nothing. Freddie suspected that the other woman operated on a constant level of solitude, never truly interacting with others and when she wasn’t around cameras or people to perform for, her entire social nature disappeared.

“Who is it?” Freddie let out a low whistle as she opened the file. A politician who seemed to keep a low profile looked back at her from a photo that looked as though it had been pulled from surveillance footage. “I was not expecting him.”

“I don’t need him out of a job. I just need to watch him sweat,” the older woman told her in her usual cool and collected tone.

“I can’t promise that my investigating won’t uncover more than what you’ve brought me,” Freddie retorted playfully. Bedelia raised her eyebrows and her smile widened. Freddie smiled uneasily and decided self preservation might be a better route to take than simply running with what she had. Anything she found could always be saved for a later date. “Though I’ve got a very full plate at the moment. I’m sure I can put the really deep research off for a while,” she assured the Vice President quickly.

Bedelia’s smile relaxed as though she was capable of being casual. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“No.” Freddie tipped the file and humbly said, “Thank you.”

Bedelia looked down at her wrist, adjusting the dainty watch. “And, Freddie?”

“Yes, Madame Vice President?”

“If you write about my niece again, I will not be able to find it in my heart to be as merciful to you as I have been to my colleagues.”

Freddie smiled and wondered if this was a joke. “You call what you do ‘merciful’?”

Bedelia was already walking back to the car door being held open for her. “Have a good evening, Freddie.”
Chapter End Notes

Art found at: http://ninjaninaiii.tumblr.com/post/78146360220/part-1-2-of-the-illustrations
Chapter Nineteen

Will listened to the steady rhythm of Hannibal’s feet on the treadmill as he looked over the body of a mutilated woman who’d had her tongue torn out and nose cut off, her body left completely bled out beside her expensive car in the parking lot of the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore. She’d been flagged as a potential Chesapeake Ripper victim, one of the first ‘artistic’ killings, one of the earlier murders building up to what he did now. ‘She made me angry. She did something to spite me and I held her accountable for it,’ his mind hissed. ‘She was an impulsive kill. I don’t plan for this tonight—it was an opportunity borne of my frustration that I wouldn’t be able to find her later.’

“What’s one of your worst memories about your father, Will?” Hannibal asked, still facing the windows overlooking Washington DC.

“What’s one of yours, Dr Lecter?” he asked defensively and while he regretted his tone, he didn’t like it when anyone tried to reach for low-hanging fruit.

Hannibal’s answer came after a moment. “My father yelling at me for taking my sister down to the duck pond. He found it incredibly irresponsible that I had her so close to deep water when she didn’t know how to swim.”

Will considered this was probably true, as Hannibal’s father had been killed when he had been eight —there hadn’t been other time for bad memories. Will picked at the edge of brown folder the police report was held in, feeling guilty and petty. It only seemed fair he return the exposed nerve.

“My dad had a disposable camera he’d bought just for my high school graduation. After he took the photos, he handed the camera to me to put in the glove compartment. When he wasn’t looking, I tossed the camera away. Under a car in the parking lot. I…wanted it run over.”

“You didn’t want photographs of yourself.” Hannibal’s voice held no judgement.

“Hate them. Even now.” His mind filled the silence with a nasty, ‘Then why did you get into this line of work?’ Will kept his face turned from the President, because he knew the self-hatred was evident in his expression. “He always blamed himself for losing the camera. He felt like a failure for it. Just another mistake he’d made in his life. I never told him what really happened. I was ashamed.”

“You were protecting your own emotional needs,” the President offered.

“At the cost of his. It was a hateful thing to do.” Will would never be able to forgive himself for it.

There was silence between the two of them once more and Will looked at a set of documents beneath the case file. He was really supposed to be focused on them, but Hannibal had brought over this particular Chesapeake Ripper, wanting to know what Will saw and naturally he obliged.

“Are you worried Abigail would see you as the father who is nothing but a failure and an embarrassment?” Hannibal’s voice was lower this time as though saying it any louder might destroy the delicate ties they’d created between him and the young woman.

“All the time. I’m not exactly the ‘cool dad’.” He glanced at the other man briefly. “Or the successful one.”

“Are you worried that she tolerates you? That she’s biding her time before she can get away from you?” Hannibal asked.
Like he had with his dad? “Yes.”

Hannibal slowed the treadmill and hopped off, toweling off the sweat on his neck; Will handed over a glass of water he had poured for the President’s cool down, the action pure instinct at this point—keeping the other man’s life streamlined was a matter of paying attention to details, which eventually became habit.

“You needn’t worry, Will. She is expecting you just the way you are.”

“She should expect better,” Will muttered accepting the glass and putting it back on the tray.

Hannibal was quiet until Will finally looked up and then he said, “When Abigail was younger, I once told her that she has the gift of bringing out the best in others. The hidden side no one else gets to see.”

Will let the words settle for a moment, wondering what the good in could possibly be within him that Abigail could find. “And you think she brings out the best in me?”

“You haven’t let yourself give in to it entirely yet, but yes.”

Will wanted to ask for a kiss, to ask for comfort, but the desire was immediately quashed beneath every other thought, that it was weak, not to mention unprofessional. He looked down at the floor and thought about how in terms of paternal success, he was deserved to have his nose cut off, left to bleed out in a miserable state—

“Will?”

He didn’t look up. “Yes?”

“Are you all right?”

“Fine.” Will quickly took a step back, not wanting any physical contact. “I need to run these down to the Vice President’ office before your lunch. And this needs to be put away as well.” He waved the case file slightly, purposely avoiding the President’s face.

“I shall see you downstairs.”

*****

The next day Will presented Abigail with a fly tying kit, one bought in the haste and heat of frustration. He nearly didn’t give it to her, apprehensive to give her anything—that always ran the risk of overstepping his bounds, but Hannibal spotted the wrapped gift before he could spare himself any embarrassment, forcing Will to hand it over to the young woman.

He fumbled with his words to explain what it was as she unwrapped it, willing to spoil the surprise rather than have her discover something that disappoint her. But she immediately thanked him, throwing her arms around him and Hannibal had smiled at him as he untied his apron, stating that he would call to the furniture department and have a work table brought up for the living room to be a station for them to work at. He gave Hannibal a grateful look and one of the many weights on his shoulders lifted finally.

*****

Her father was humming in the shower and she hummed along as she opened a teak box on the altar; there was black book and she sat back on her heels as she opened it where a ribbon marker had been
left inside. It was the notebook filled with a massive list written neatly in her father’s elegant handwriting and beside each accomplished task on the list was a date and a small gold foil star. Much of her first year with her father had been under mild sedatives and his praise of her behaviour left her breathless, left her feeling acknowledged by the divine being she walked beside. Some of the tasks on the list were plain and unexciting: Memorised home phone number, July 7th, 2001; First plane trip, December 31st, 2002; Confirmation, May 29th, 2005. Some are more enthusiastic: First Opera Performance, November 1st, 2002. First Dinner Party, January 1st, 2003. First Boat Trip to Nantucket, December 24th, 2001. Some of them are skill sets: Ordered Dinner in French, November 22nd, 2008; Foxtrot, February, 2nd, 2003; Properly broil a roast, August 17, 2006; Skinning, May 5th, 2005. Everything on the list held an underlying theme of ‘Knowledge Needed to Survive In Hannibal Lecter’s World’, all the elements to remind her that she was a good girl, such a very good girl. This book had been her bible, the only set of law to live under and anything accomplished to please him, anything done to make his new image as a politician and family man had been worth every tear spilt trying to learn, every hour spent memorising, every moment of pushing through exhaustion to earn his smile.

Success had been built with fingers numb from repetition, good posture, and the sense enough to understand that if her father wanted something, he would have it. So she gave him the sister he had lost, the daughter he had found, and the muse to impress.

The book was the story of Abigail reborn.

‘I am not the daughter of a man. I am the daughter of a god,’ she thought to herself as she heard movement behind her.

Her father emerged from the bathroom hair dried and a towel around his waist.

“And what are you reading?” His smile betrayed that he was well aware of what she was looking at.

“Wrote name in cursive without guidelines, December 2nd, 2001,” she said softly, shutting the book. His eyes crinkled at the corners as his smile deepened and he continued on to the bedroom to dress.

“Do we really have to go to Mass?” she called out, knowing he wouldn’t speak until she was welcome in the bedroom; it gave her time to return the book to its place and fan out the candles she’d lit.

“No, I suppose we do not,” he finally replied and she climbed to her feet, walking barefoot to find him standing at the closet, wearing only brown trousers and socks.

He was studying a selection of colourful shirts to wear; other presidents restricted their wardrobe to basic black and navy and had their outfits picked out for a full week in advance, but her father was so temperamental and often didn’t know what he’d put on until he reached his closet. And he was certainly not a man to to avoid hue.

“The green one.” She watched him pull it off the hanger and stand in front of the mirror. “When’s Will getting here?”

“He is due to arrive in twenty minutes.”

As she sat down on a chair by the closet, she had to ask something that had been bothering her for a while now. “Don’t you think just handing it to him on a silver platter is a bit…clumsy?”
There was no need to voice aloud that she was speaking of the relationship they were so carefully directing him towards. Possibly it appeared so obvious to her because she was aware of it, but thought they ought to be more subtle about it.

Her father disagreed. “Perhaps in another life you and I could have the luxury of hiding ourselves in a different manner. What we show Will here is an illusion. Our reflection in his mirror.”

“It’s not smothering him?”

He left the top button of his shirt unbuttoned, an attempt to appear casual. “Do you think it is?”

The question was loaded.

“I think sometimes he gets overwhelmed,” she admitted, standing from the chair to find the trousers’ matching waistcoat. “On a deeper level, he knows we’re leading him into something.”

“Of course he knows. We wouldn’t want anyone who didn’t suspect something.” He slipped the waistcoat on, buttoning it. “If we create any distance with ourselves now, he will see it as rejection.”

“Wouldn’t that drive him to try to make us happy?” she asked as she searched through his cufflink case, selecting the gold double-panels that bore the Presidential Seal; they’d been a gift from the Secret Service on his birthday.

“No. Will takes rejection as a finality.” He accepted the cufflinks.

“Once bitten, twice shy,” she murmured.

“And he has spent his entire life being bitten.” He kissed her temple.

“You look very handsome this morning. I’ve always liked that green shirt on you.” Her fingers pinched at the cuff of the tattersall cloth.

“Thank you. It’s not a pattern I find particularly flattering, but I wanted to give it a bit of use before the end of the year.”

“It makes you look so tan.” She smoothed the back of his waistcoat.

He feigned annoyance at the piece of clothing. “I knew it wouldn’t work for the style, but I bought it anyway.”

“You pull it off. It makes your shoulders look broad.” She leant her head against him, smiling into the mirror.

Abigail was keenly aware of how much control her father held over her, how she sought to censor herself for the sake of his happiness. It was natural now—rebellion lingered in small spaces, but she managed to keep it under control. Her life was a series of milestones that showed how well she’d adapted.

She’d known better than to ask for a car for her sixteenth birthday—driving equalled independence and that was not an option in her father’s world. What could she possibly want to do that wouldn’t include him? She had earned her driver’s license only because Aunt Caroline had taken her down to the DMV in Hyannis Port, believing the lie that her father was simply too busy to take her in Maryland. After that, she’d only ever driven the Bentley during midnight cruises through Baltimore once or twice a month, a special treat for perfect grades.
And she couldn’t remember ever picking out her own clothes in a store. That was her father’s job—she’d come home and find shopping bags in her bedroom to be explored and adored; beautiful pieces that adorned her perfectly, colours that made her eyes brighter, legs longer, and hid toned muscles from prey. Her closet held thousands of dollars in dresses, shoes, sweaters, and trousers, but none of it had been her decision. She wasn’t even sure what she’d do if she had to buy her own clothes. The thought was her ‘if a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound?’.

Time spent over at a friend’s house was also consumed with conversations via text message with him; Marissa called it ‘co-dependancy’ and Abigail had scoffed—Marissa didn’t even know the half of it. She’d mastered quick, detailed messaging because making him wait was unacceptable and she imagined that he carefully transcribed each interaction in another notebook that he’d hidden somewhere, a book of their dialogue and need to talk to one another at all times. After all, she’d spent time at Sidwell sneaking texts to him; any reply he sent back was a thrill because even when they were apart, they had no choice but remain together.

He was the angel on her shoulder, the devil watching her back.

She…supposed it wasn’t healthy to have accepted this life, to have made him the sun in her universe. She wasn’t stupid. When she was a freshman, her health class teacher had spoken extensively about the dangers of an abusive relationship and what the signs of one were. But she loved the control. She loved the thought of being nothing without him because it was the truth. And even if she’d considered making him stop, it wouldn’t have been fair to him—he belonged to her. She controlled him—without her, his life would simply be hedonistic pleasures. Being a father elevated him to a higher status, an enlightened form. Gods couldn’t merely destroy—they also had to create. He was her victim, not the other way around.

*****

The back lawn of the White House had been prepared for the annual Fathers Day luncheon. The weather was perfect and the air still. Children were running around and playing, adults were socialising, and the thick smoke wafted from the barbecues set up; her father was standing at one grilling hamburger patties, 100% all American Angus beef—it reeked horribly. There were a few men in shorts and polos standing around as they chatted with him, unable to hide their suspicion that a man with his accent could possibly know anything about cooking meats over an open flame.

Abigail wanted to linger around her father, but listening to the dull conversation he was forced to engage in was painful and she knew that her presence was serving only as a distraction, so she wandered about the clusters of military spouses drinking lemonade and beers, shook hands with the veterans and asked if they had everything they needed before moving on; twice, a group of teenagers tried to rope her into playing basketball with them on the courts by the picnic tables, but she smiled and declined. She was still rehabbing her image in the public’s eye and she wasn’t in the mood for fucking around with anyone her own age.

She found Will lurking in the shade of the barrier hedges, his glasses carefully angled just so.

“Uncomfortable?” she asked, coming to standing beside him.

“To put it mildly.”

“You know, you could go inside.”

He shook his head, a grim line set on his face. “Your dad needs me.”

She didn’t reply.
They stood in silence together, occasionally approached by guests wanting to meet her and wanting their picture taken together as well, but for the most part they were quiet observers of the celebration for fathers. Abigail wondered if Will felt lonely.

He tilted his head towards her, but he didn’t look her way—his eyes were locked on her father’s every movement. “He’s not happy here.”

“But he knows this is his place. So he endures.” She loved how that particular word spoke of stoicism and suffering.

“He shouldn’t have to.”

She agreed. “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

“Eating hamburgers probably isn’t what your late great uncle meant.”

She fought to keep from smirking. “Leaving one’s comfort zone is always healthy.”

“Looks like he’s ready to start serving the food.”

They parted and she found her assigned seat at a table opposite her father’s. Here she was supposed to hold court with soccer moms and the occasional stay-at-home dad, all military spouses; everyone was polite, babying her as though she was their child or babysitter, asking stupid questions in regards to if she was ‘having fun’ or ‘proud of her dad’. She gave the answers they wanted to hear and touched upon their own lives to deflect attention away from herself. It was a tactic she’d learned very young when her father had first started in politics and she found it a very successful method.

Abigail feigned interest in the conversation around her, only vaguely aware of what was being said as she smiled and nodded; her eyes kept moving to the table where her father sat. He looked physically pained to eat the hamburger off a paper plate, but managed to eat the whole thing elegantly so that the Press Corp would have photographic proof that Hannibal Lecter could relate to the common man, an All American Blue Eyed Boy. She picked at the grilled mushrooms on her own plate, watching him carefully.

In the sixth grade, they had built a mushroom farm for her science fair presentation. She had wanted to make it in the basement, but her father had insisted there was more romance to hunting them in the woods. And he had been right of course. They’d buried the bodies of diabetics amongst the trees of the family preserve, and they’d traveled out every weekend to document the growth of the fungi; as she wrote her notes carefully in her notebook, he’d told her stories of how once upon a time he would take her looking for mushrooms behind their childhood home on the edges of Paris and she’d realised he was speaking in Lithuanian and that he was her brother. They’d held hands and wander around the forest, speaking to one another of their past—one that slipped the bonds of reality, a fairytale they were both invested in. Sometimes she’d question what he had done to her, but for the most part it wasn’t important—her death that night in the clinic had served a higher purpose and if she denied that, what was the point of living?

There were kids still yelling as they played on the basketball court and Abigail found herself wanting to snarl at the parents present for not keeping their children seen and not heard, but she pressed her lips together and gave pretty smiles to the press cameras instead. When it was finally acceptable for her to leave the group of adults she’d been dining with, she excused herself and made a beeline to Will; he’d seated himself on the low brick planter that held the hedges, dragging tater tots in runny ketchup, ignoring what was left of a hot dog. His shoulders hunched in on himself and she felt a wave of compassion—he needed her, someone to act as his buffer to the overwhelming senses.
“Do you know what a memory palace is?” she asked as she came to sit beside him.

He jerked out of whatever trance he was in. “What?”

“A memory palace. Have you heard of the term before?” She glanced at the food on his plate; ketchup was now touching his potato salad and pickled Vidalia onions.

He looked at her cautiously. “No.”

“It where you can create a world inside your head to retreat to—it can store all your information or it can be a hiding spot.” She folded her hands neatly in her lap. “It’s an ancient Greek practise.”

“Do you have a memory palace?” His voice was low, almost a mumble.

“Mmhmm.”

“Your dad taught you.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “And he has one, too.”

Her father had needed to give her a safe space to explore where others couldn’t see, a gift and a resource. The world around her was far too stupid and slow to live in. Life with her father was like living on a constant high—nothing was impossible and nothing would be denied to either of them. How could she ever explain to anyone that she couldn't live with boundaries except the ones her father had made? This was what they wanted to offer Will and for the first time since she’d been in her life, she understood what it was her father wanted—not a pet to tease and toy with, but someone that she could share secrets with, someone she wouldn’t want to lie to. She could take care of him in the way she could never take care of her father; she could be the support, the rock, the anchor. They could be family.

“Do you want another?” she asked kindly.

“I can—“

“Let me get you another. It’s Father’s Day.” She placed her inflections just so, wanting him to read between the lines.

His eyes darted upwards slightly and he surrendered the plate to her; smiling kindly so that he understood it was no imposition to her, she walked off with it, folding it slightly in her hands and dropping it into one of the trashcans stationed throughout the lawn. She walked over to the large buffet tables that held large serving platters brought out from the kitchen, close to where her father’s picnic table was positioned. At her presence, he stood.

“And here is my pride and joy,” her father announced.

She smiled adoringly at him, seeing the greed in his eyes; he was jealous that she was spending time with Will, wanting to have his cherished possession at his side, but without asking, quickly began filling a paper plate for her to take back to their starving favourite.

“Is everyone enjoying their lunch?” she asked kindly as she allowed her father to take care of the food, making eye contact with everyone at the table.

The men all agreed they found everything as hospitable as a house of the people should be and she channeled her pride into a pleasant nod, a humble pawn pleased to see Washington working for its citizens.
“Would you like to join us?” her father asked as he handed her the plate, the question sounding innocent enough to the others listening.

“Thank you, but I wouldn’t want to interrupt your lunch.”

Everyone at the table insisted she remain, that she was more than welcome and she laughed and blushed, playing the flustered girl getting attention she was too humble to accept. She backed away with the plate of food, promising to return later to spend time with them and one she turned away, she allowed her smile to drop to something a shade more comfortable. Will would be able to tell when her smiles were a lie and it was much easier to give them as half-truths instead.

“There you are.” She presented the food to him.

“You—you didn’t have to—“

“I know.” She found that she enjoyed interrupting him to give him the correct emotions to respond to. Sometimes it was just quicker to tell him what she wanted. “I wanted to.”

He began to eat the food in earnest and she had to bite her tongue to keep from asking if his encephalitis medication fucked with his appetite, causing him to constantly crave.

“Aren’t you hungry?” he asked, gesturing his plastic fork to her empty hands.

She shook her head. “No. It’s not really my kind of food.”

“Your dad has you spoiled.”

She knew that it was a criticism veiled a joke and while anyone who insulted the way her father had raised her would immediately be subject to her distain, she acknowledged that their world was still elusive and confusing to him.

“I like picnic food. I’m just used to his recipes,” she explained, keeping her voice gentle. She wouldn’t scare her stray.

“You’re missing out,” he replied, his tone a bit softer. Perhaps he’d been worried that she wouldn’t accept the lowbrow food he himself enjoyed.

“Perhaps,” she said fondly, making eye contact with her father across the tables.

****

Will’s dress suit arrived three days before he was expected to attend the concert with the First Family and his stomach twisted into ugly knots for a solid seventy-two hours. He’d never owned a tuxedo before and paranoid that it would get damaged or covered in dog hair, he left it in his office and the night of the concert, he dressed downstairs; his new shoes were uncomfortable, but polished neatly and he’d managed to comb his hair neatly. He didn’t shave because when he did, he looked like a child and as a man pushing forty, that wasn’t a look he was aiming before. He wanted desperately not to attend the concert, but he’d been assured that they would simply listen to the music and then leave—there would be no photo-ops or socialising—so he had no real reason to deny the invitation to partake in the President’s favourite pastime.

“So what’s the opera about?” Will asked when he went upstairs to the Residence, watching Abigail affixing yellow stone earrings without the aid of a mirror. She was wearing a red dress that covered her neck, but left her shoulders, arms and back bare. It was a sophisticated look, taking her from a mere Politician’s Daughter to the First Lady of the United States; she didn’t look older, she looked
“Dante.” Her hand brushed at her carefully coiffed hair before moving to the other earring. “It’s the first time it’s being performed outside of Italy. Dad and I saw it two years ago. It’s breathtaking. You’ll love it, Will.”

“I don’t speak Italian.”

Her shoulders lifted and fell in a small shrug. “That’s okay. You’ll feel what’s going on.”

He glanced at the yellow stones catching in the light by her throat. “Diamonds?”

“Sapphires. Aunt Bee is letting me borrow them.” She smiled, her lips painted a bold red that matched her dress, and turned to face him completely. “How do I look?”

“You clean up nicely, too, you know.”

The doors to President’s bedroom opened and they both turned to look at the man who they’d been waiting for: Hannibal looked born to wear the tuxedo he was in and Will had admitted on multiple occasions that the President was handsome, tonight he was the epitome of masculine elegance. He swallowed hard as Hannibal approached.

“Are we ready to leave?” he asked as he came to stand before them.

Will looked away, knowing he was staring so Abigail was the one who answered for them. “Yes.”

Hannibal held a hand out to her and spun her around slowly, admiring her. “You look enchanting tonight, Abigail.”

Abigail accepted the words with the disinterested ease of someone who was accustomed to hearing compliments as facts. “Of course I do. You picked everything out.”

Hannibal looked pleased and Will’s eyes widened slightly, but before he could devote any energy to analysing the moment, the President turned to him. “And Will, I know you don’t have any cufflinks of your own.”

A box was produced from the President’s jacket and handed to him.

“Thank you.” He nearly protested that the gift, but Abigail gave a subtle shake of her head as she stared at him, so he simply repeated his appreciation. “Thanks, Hannibal.”

The President looked pleased at his response. “It is my pleasure, Will.”

Will pulled out the small white tabs that had held the shirt cuffs together and stuffed them in his trouser pockets as he pulled the cufflinks out of the box; simple silver versions of traditional silk knots, a familiar shape to anyone who’d been raised around boats. They were nice, Will had to admit.

A few facts about the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall: it was the home of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, considered one of the most respected in the world; during his time as a surgeon, Hannibal had served as a sitting member of the board of directors, though still remained closely associated with the organisation as a governor as well. The building used a series of convex curves to avoid flat surfaces or ninety-degree angles inside the hall and there were three levels to sit in: the main floor,
the grand tier, and the terrace; the grand tier and terrace hosted balcony and box seating and because everywhere in the Hall was ideal for listening, seating ended up becoming a choice of what one could afford.

For security reasons, the terrace was secured for the President and his entourage. Hannibal seemed ambivalent that there were snipers in position to shoot at any potential threat. No, Hannibal was simply returning to old pleasures tonight, the familiarity of his former Baltimore haunts and all of the security could be overlooked easily. Will envied him for that. There were twelve agents on the balcony with them, all dressed in their finest, but still had the distinct aggressive stance of people on high alert. Many of the agents were ones he only knew in passing, but the three main tails—Beverly, Price, and Zeller—had accompanied them as well. Beverley was wearing an elegant black dress and low heels, an earpiece wired to her; she winked at Will as she took a seat in the row behind them and he looked away. Price and Zeller were stationed a few seats down from him and were bickering about who wrote better opera (“It’s Germany. Have you even listened to opera?” “Zee, you sweet, stupid boy. One word: Russia.”), their eyes scanning the masses below them.

Hannibal was to sit between he and Abigail, Will to the left and Abigail to the right. Beside Abigail was her usual shadow, the quiet Barney Matthews. Georgia sat towards the back of the balcony, dressed in a demure yellow and carrying a beaded purse. She offered an enthusiastic smile and waved at him when she caught his eye and he offered a tepid smile in return. Everyone on the balcony stood as Hannibal took his seat and he gave a single nod signaling that they could sit once more. Will wanted to say something clever to catch his attention (knowing exactly how ridiculous he was being), but Hannibal merely gave him a quick acknowledgement and then turned to his right to ask Agent Matthews what he thought about Danielle de Niese, a name that Will immediately recognised from the programme he held in his hands. She was one of the lead singers and as he turned his attention back to the folded paper, hoping to glean some sort of information as to what the President was actually asking for an opinion on (Was it her style? Is she not the usual performer?), Matthews laughed and spoke of how he’d seen her perform in Buenos Aires two years before and thought she was absolutely perfect for the role of Beatrice. Abigail laughed and told him that was her thought exactly.

Will shut his programme and squirmed in his seat uncomfortably as he realised he was the only person present who had nothing to add to the conversation. As a form of denial about the whole matter, he’d forgotten completely to research the opera or its music. Well, he hadn’t forgotten—mostly pushed it back further and further from his list of important things to look up and now it was too late. He didn’t have to use any form of empathy to know that the President would frown at him playing with his BlackBerry now that he was at the Meyerhoff. He instead gazed out at the orchestra assembling on the stage, trying to think of the fishing spot behind his house as a form of meditation. Finally the lights dimmed and he relaxed back into his seat, prepared to tune out the music when it became boring.

But it didn’t.

Watching Hannibal during the performance was perhaps a bit rude, not to mention ill advised (what if Freddie Lounds was here? The last thing that needed to be posted to her site was footage of the President’s assistant staring at the man he was supposed to work for), but he couldn’t help looking over at him to watch his subtle but very emotional responses to the songs sung and performed. Hannibal Lecter was for the most part a closed book when it came to what he was thinking and Will was aware that he put on more visual cues for those around him than he was used to, otherwise he’d have the same dead expression that men like Governor Budge possessed. But the music was coaxing reactions to the surface and Will wanted to see them all. If it upset Hannibal that he was doing this, he’d apologise for it later, but he was going to keep observing until it was not longer feasible.
During the final three songs, Hannibal’s hand found his. Will had held hands with a girl at a school assembly once in the small auditorium of an Alabama high school he’d attended for all of two weeks, his palm sweaty in the dark, his heart pounding. But tonight, Hannibal’s hand was warm and encompassing, a complement to the swelling choruses and lifting instrumentals. Will wasn’t sure what the etiquette to hand holding with a world leader, but he decided that it was probably time his eyes should return to the stage. At one point the President’s long fingers gripped him just a bit tighter and he glanced to the other man as covertly as possible, only to be gifted with the most spectacular and unexpected sight of seeing the other man’s eyes watering.

When the song came to an end, Hannibal and Abigail stood as they applauded, prompting everyone to get to their feet. Will, of course, followed closely, mimicking their actions. Both were gazing upon the bowing singers with absolute reverence, humbled at the beauty of the performance. But Will knew that anyone looking up to the balcony would see Hannibal as though he was a Roman emperor, applauding the performance of gladiators that had pleased him greatly in their power and mastery.

“Did you enjoy the performance, Will?” Hannibal finally asked as the lights returned.

He nodded, adjusting his glasses. “I did.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Agent Price stood and quietly spoke around Will. “Mr President, the performers wish to meet you.”

Hannibal nodded and then offered a slight smile. “Will, you are welcome to join Abigail and I.”

“I think I’ll hang back,” Will said quietly, not at all interested in experiencing the awkwardness of communicating to strangers with the use of a translator.

“Very well.” He turned to his daughter and offered out his arm. “Abigail.”

“We’ll meet you in the car,” Abigail said kindly before turning to her agent. “Barney, do you want to meet the cast?”

The tall man beamed at her. “I would be honoured.”

Will taken back to the motorcade outside, lugging the small valise he’d carried along with him; he was formally off the clock, but he’d felt strange leaving behind anything the President might need. He’d only stocked the essentials—spare cufflinks, antiseptic wipes, stain removing pen, double-sided tape strips—and brought the bag to rest comfortably on his knees. Sitting in the car by himself, one of the nameless evening agents standing outside the door as the only escort, he felt drained, wanting to just go home so he could sleep a few hours before having to show up in the morning. He closed his eyes, leaning his head against the back of the seat as he hummed the songs he’d heard on stage; while he hadn’t known much about the performance, he had been quiet aware that the song Hannibal had chosen to first seek his hand for had been called, ‘Vide Cor Meum.

He smiled. He’d already look up the translation on his BlackBerry. ‘Behold My Heart’.
Chapter Twenty

Will knew it was exceptionally rude of him to show up to the Residence this late at night, but he was hungry and hope he might be able to ask for something to eat; he wasn’t prone to these impulsive moments, partially because he wasn’t used to having someone to turn to, but also because he never wanted to find out what it would be like to be turned away. And with the Lecters, he simply didn’t want to be so presumptuous that he thought he could just walk into their home without permission.

“Will, I should really get you your own key.”

He looked up and saw that he’d walked into the kitchen’s doorway; the Lecter’s were already congregated inside as though they’d been expecting him, Hannibal at the stop and Abigail at the counter.

“I’m sorry—I just didn’t want to go home yet. I don’t know what I’m doing,” he apologised, feeling like an ass.

“I think you do.” Hannibal’s eyes gleamed copper red as he offered a small smile. “We’re having dinner and we’d be delighted to have you join us.”

Will stepped forward, trying to convince himself to relax; coming to stand next to the young woman sitting at the counter, she turned to look at him and after feeling the intensity of her stare, he glanced down at her to see her pupils were blown wide and she had a dreamy smile on her face, looking very much not like herself.

“I’m so glad you’re here. Now we’re all home. Dad’s making breakfast for dinner.”

Her voice was small and airy, furthering Will’s suspicions that something was off. His mind ran through the possibilities at breakneck speed and he pulled a pencil out of the inside of his jacket.

“Abigail, I want you to watch this.”

He slowly shook the pencil and it waved with an optical illusion as though it was made of rubber and she frowned, studying it.

“What…is she high?” He turned to look at Hannibal as he allowed Abigail to take the pencil from his hand.

Hannibal would not look at him, his eyes focused on the cutting board and herbs. “Abigail is permitted to relax with tea under my supervision at my discretion.”

Will grit his teeth. “Is that responsible, Hannibal?”

“He’s such a good dad. You were right. He just wants to look out for me.” Abigail was smiling at him fondly.

“Abigail, why don’t you select the music for the evening?” Hannibal suggested.

Abigail left her post and wandered to the kitchen, leaving Will to turn towards the President.

“What the hell are you doing letting her get high?” he hissed, wanting some sort of response from the other man besides the usual calm.

But Hannibal didn’t give him what he wanted. “Abigail has been under profound duress. Her
nightmares have been getting in the way of her regular functioning life. I am merely guiding her thoughts so that she is no longer plagued by things that upset her.” Hannibal looked up from the herbs he’d been chopping, the corners of his mouth curling. “This evening, we shall be her guides.”

Will did not return the smile and refused to argue further while Abigail was so close—he wasn’t sure how she might respond to raised voices or angry tones, especially when it involved the father she was so protective of. He assisted Hannibal with carrying the dining room; the electric lights of the chandelier had been dimmed and there were candles lit around the room. Everything was held under a soft, forgiving glow and as they seated themselves at the table, Will took in the details around him. The music playing was soft and gentle, something—for lack of a better word—exotic. The food smelt rich, but familiar, all comfort foods that one might want to wake up to. There was a flower arrangement on the table—a new one every day, Will knew—of large cream coloured rose-like flowers, cabbage like leaves that were dusky grey, and tendrils of honeysuckle vines that spilled out of the low engraved silver bowl they’d been placed in. Will touched the honeysuckle vines with fingers absently, recalling how once upon a time he’d slept in a house in Louisiana that had been surrounded by them, the air thick and sweet with their scent. He wondered what memories they evoked in Abigail.

All of this had to be for her sake, after all.

Abigail held her hand out to Will across the table and he hesitantly took it, looking between her and Hannibal; she bowed her head and closed her eyes, indicating—much to Will’s surprise—that they were going to pray.

“Uncle Jack, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thank you for giving us this White House so that Daddy can lead the people and teach them manners and show them that you serve the food from the left and that Will uses the wrong fork for his salads. Forgive me for my run on sentence. Thank you for the new laws Aunt Bee has written and for congress staying out of her way and doing what they’re supposed to do. I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this House, and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof. Amen.”

“Amen,” Hannibal agreed, lifting his head and smiling to his daughter.

They released hands and proceeded cut into the dinner that was set before them.

“You take the first bite, Will. You’re the guest.” Abigail watched him with starstruck eyes and he complied, bringing food up to his mouth and chewing, nodding his approval. “He likes it, Daddy. She was a good choice to make tonight.”

“She?” Will asked, mouth still full.

Her eyes flicked down to his plate. “Your breakfast-dinner.”

He glanced at her food. “And yours is a ‘she’, too?”

Her serene smile remained in place. “Of course.”

“Abigail, let us not ascribe genders to our food,” Hannibal chided gently, cutting the sausage on his plate.

“Oh, right, gotcha.” She feigned zipping her lips shut.

Will gave Hannibal a stern look; when Abigail went to bed, they were going to have a very serious talk about what was acceptable for Abigail’s well being and at the top of the list was ‘not giving her drugs’. As they ate their dinners, Hannibal kept the tone of the conversation very light and soothing,
allowing for Abigail to say what was on her mind and Will listened carefully, trying to find any clues. His own frustration was in the way, however, and he kept staring at Hannibal. They shouldn’t be doping her up—they should be talking her through her problems the best they could without anything that would hinder her higher thinking. They should never, never manipulate her!

As he opened his mouth to express his anger to Hannibal, the other man asked,

“What do you see Abigail?”

Abigail looked adoringly between them, she whispered, “Family.”

When Hannibal and Abigail washed and dried the dishes, Will watched them interact together. Abigail seemed relaxed and Hannibal was asking her questions that he realised were subtly leading her down a path of talking about her feelings, which immediately began to fill his own mind with uncomfortable insight. He left them for the living room, trying to sort his feelings. It was so unethical and he wanted nothing more than to take Abigail home with him where she could sleep off whatever she’d been given and just rest. As he stood beside the grey and red curtains, looking out across the White House property, he wished he knew what to do. After some time, he was joined by the President.

“I’ve sent Abigail to bed. She should have sweet dreams tonight,” Hannibal informed him cheerfully.

Will glared at Hannibal, but looked out the window again. “You cannot drug Abigail. This is not safe.”

“You’re upset with me.” Hannibal’s hands found their way to Will’s side, turning him towards him and then surprisingly, wrapped his arms around Will’s shoulders.

“Yes! You—you can’t do that!” He almost pushed him away, but instinct told him that if he rejected the other man’s offer of comfort and apology, he would never receive it again, so he was left leaning back so that he could make his irritation known. “Abigail is…”

As he trailed off, Hannibal filled in the unspoken. “Precious.”

“Yes. She’s—we can’t manipulate her mind like that. Neither of us are psychologists, neither of us are trained for this.” Will looked up at the other man. “How long have you done this with her?”

“Many years.”

“Jesus.” Will accidentally allowed himself to lean his head forward as he thought about what Abigail had to suffer under for so long, but then jerked his head back, not wanting to give in to desire to be close. “Does it work?”

“It would seem so.” Hannibal’s lips against his neck were feather light and Will flinched slightly. “I would never do this if I thought it might hurt her. Surely you know that I would never hurt Abigail.”

“It’s just not very responsible.” His eyes fluttered shut as fingers threaded through his hair, tracing concave lines across his scalp.

“There are many things in her life that cannot be discussed confidentially with others. She only has you and I, Will.” Hannibal moved their bodies closer. “Only we know what she’s been through.”

“Isn’t it dangerous?” Will’s protests were becoming weaker and slower.

“When I was young, I experienced many distressing nightmares and memories of my past. I found
that with the careful administration of psychotropics and music, I was able to give myself the balance my mind needed. I was able to fix my pain. I did not become an addict. I instead found peace.

Contentment.”

“So…” Will didn’t want to give Hannibal the satisfaction of knowing more about the use of drugs and the mind than he did. “It’s still not responsible.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you.” This time, the kiss was placating on his cheek.

Willed sighed, trying to find the right words to say. “You didn’t disappoint me. I’m just worried.”

Hannibal’s lips landed close to Will’s mouth, his voice low and calming. “You are so good, Will.”

Will nearly turned his head so that they could kiss, fighting the compulsion to wrap his arms around the other man.

“I need to get home,” he said in reply finally, his own defeat.

“Of course. Allow me to walk you to elevator.”

“Does Abigail pray to JFK?” Will asked softly. His fingers had twisted themselves around the President’s and he managed to loosen them so that they weren’t walking and holding hands.

“My cousin bestowed the habit upon her.” There was a hint of humour in his voice.

“She prays to her late uncle. She thinks that it’s her destiny to carry on his legacy,” Will said, suddenly able to see the Vice President in a completely different light.

“You are the only person who has ever realised that,” Hannibal admitted as they reached the elevator.

Neither made the move to summon the lift with the buttons on the wall. Will didn’t want to leave—at least not with the worry that Hannibal might not be happy with the stance he’d taken.

“I trust your judgement with Abigail. I just…I think that this should only ever be a last resort. Or never.” He sighed, horrified that this was a topic they even had to kick around.

“We shall discuss it together next time.”

Will didn’t look up, echoing what haunted him. “We are her fathers.”

He could hear the smile on Hannibal’s lips. “Together.”

Will’s thudding heart hurt at that admission and he pressed the button on the wall to open the elevator door, stepping inside before he could touched any further, because it was so soothing and he wanted to be irritated with Hannibal. He gave a nod towards the other man, but didn’t look for a response.

*****

Will had always been aware that he asked questions at both inopportune times and often with little thought to how they would sound. Just such an occasion was during a rare hour alone together, the two working on addressing the voting rights of Washington DC; as the District was not a state, the population living there had no voting representation, a hotly contested issue for decades and the President had decided that it was time to legally change the matter. They’d situated themselves in the privacy of the lounge of the Residency’s library, sitting in the comfortable leather armchairs; Will was in the middle of reading over the speech the speechwriter had sent over and Hannibal was
reading over letters that residents had sent in regarding the matter.

Someone had included their child’s drawing of the White House and the First Family in one of the letters and Hannibal handed it over to Will with an amused look. “I don’t believe I own a green and pink checkered suit, do I?”

“That’s not a flattering combination.” Will agreed with a smile as he looked over the crayon drawing. The President had been drawn with thick lines and a purple smile. Abigail had a pink smile and red bow around her neck, both depicted as stick figures, though Hannibal’s representation bore a very loud green and pink jacket and yellow tie. As he handed the drawing back, his hand reached out and halted the other man’s hand. “What’s this scar?”

There was a pale white line on the outside of Hannibal’s hand, only visible with the way the light hit it. “Surgical.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to pry.” Will knew he’d been rude. It wasn’t his business.

After a moment, Hannibal added, “I am polydactyl.”

This intrigued Will. Details like this weren’t added to the candidates’ folios he reviewed, oddities that weren’t necessary to help win elections or stay on a party’s good side. He wondered if they been removed to make himself ‘normal’ to voters.

“Extra pinkies?” he asked as he highlighted a section of the speech.

“No. Extra third fingers.”

“Oh.”

Will found all this information exotic and useless, unable to piece together where it fit in his knowledge of Hannibal; as a child, he’d speculated what having extra fingers would be like and aside from the observation that finding gloves that fit would be impossible, he’d never actually thought about polydactylism. But what about Hannibal was to be expected? He was the most exotic creature Will had ever studied, wonderful and strange. Extra fingers weren’t unbelievable.

Will had almost put the matter out of his head when the President spoke again. “When I was in Lithuania as a child, the pinky fingers were cut off.”

Will looked up, the words hitting him hard. “Oh. I didn’t know.”

Hannibal glanced up from his letter. “It’s classified information. My uncle had a plastic surgeon fix the damage when I was thirteen.”

Classified. Will felt as though all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. That meant it had occurred during the hostage situation he’d been part of as a child. These weren’t just quirks, but grave mutilations that had been designed to inspire terror.

“Did it…”

“Yes, it hurt.”

He had no idea why he’d even ask something so insensitive and he quickly tried to make up for it, though the words came out wrong again.

“Your hands look…” he couldn’t finish the sentence because he didn’t mean to reassure the
President with compliments to his vanity.

“Thank you, Will.”

Will sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m saying really shitty things.”

“You are showing compassion without patronising me. You don’t want to feel the pain yourself.” Will almost jumped when the other man’s hand came to rest atop his. “My aunt, Lady Murasaki, once told me that in Japanese swordsmanship, the little finger’s grip is the tightest on the hilt. A little finger-amputee is therefore unable to grip his sword properly, weakening him in battle and making him more dependent on the protection of his boss.” Hannibal’s voice lowered. “My lady told me I’d never handle the sword properly.”

A violent feeling twisted through Will’s chest—someone had told Hannibal he was a disappointment and Will couldn’t imagine anything further from reality. Hannibal could make mistakes—rare ones, with good intentions—but to be the cause of someone’s dismay? He thought of how he’d spoken to the other man a few nights previous over Abigail and he felt the anxious guilt of worry. Did Hannibal think that Will was disappointed in him? He’d only been trying to help.

Tilting his hand to capture Hannibal’s in his, he didn’t say the words, but he was certain that the other man knew he was saying, “I’m sorry.”

His eyes had lowered to look at their hands together and so he missed the calculating smile on Hannibal’s lips.

*****

Abigail watched her father packing a garment bag for a two day trip he would be taking from Florida to Africa; she could hear Will in the bathroom, muttering to himself as he packed her father’s toiletries bag.

“Daddy, may I have Marissa over to stay the night?” she asked as her father selected a shirt to wear with the navy suit he’d selected.

He spared her a calculated glance and she made her face as open as possible—there was no intention to misbehave on her part and she wanted him to know that she’d definitely learned her lesson from Freddie Lounds embarrassing article. He nodded once and with a lowered voice, told her,

“I will ask you to move my alcohol somewhere she can’t find it.”

She nodded quickly, relieved he’d said yes. “Yes, of course.”

“Do not stay up too late. And you may not leave the House.”

“I understand. We’ll stay here.”

He tilted his head slightly. “I will expect you to keep me updated throughout the night.”

She smiled; she’d always loved texting with him because he was lonely. “I will.”

His smile mimicked hers. “Of course you may your friend over.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

*****
Will could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him as he read over the text that had reached his BlackBerry and without looking up, he informed what it was that was needed. “Abigail was wondering where her camouflage is.”

It was evening and they were somewhere over the Atlantic, flying to Nairobi from Miami; they’d been occupying their time by sitting privately in Air Force One’s office, looking over the Chesapeake Ripper files.

“I had her hunting clothes stored upstairs with the rest of our fall wardrobe. She should ask the ushers to retrieve it for her,” Hannibal told him.

Will texted her back with the response Hannibal relayed to him and smiled when she replied with a smiley face, though he considered it might have been for her dad and not him. Setting the BlackBerry back down, he returned his attention back to the murders, fingers itching to write down his notes.

“What do you see?” Hannibal asked.

Will didn’t hesitate. “Wound Man.”

“Yes.”

Will found this particular crime scene to be the most repulsive, which was quite a statement, considering there a few that had more gore and mutilation than this. But the overkill, the display. Twenty-five instruments that had been impaled throughout the man’s body at precise angles. It was so…grotesque. It was a theatre piece, an art instillation for spectators to stand around and gawk at. He didn’t have to look at the report to know that kidneys, small intestine, and lungs had been taken.

“You have a sketch of it in your study.”

Hannibal was quiet and Will looked up over the frames of his glasses, replaying what he’d said in his head. Had the tone been accusatory? Disgusted?

“I do,” Hannibal finally agreed.

Will nodded quickly. “Someone who either appreciates medical texts or mediaeval woodblock. Which only further emphasises the likelihood that he’s a doctor. Highly skilled. Uh…I know you haven’t been a surgeon in ten years, but was there anyone in your memory that might…” Will straightened his back and in the most careful tone he could manage, asked, “Is there anyone that you can think of that might fit the profile the FBI has made?”

“No.” Hannibal’s fingers brushed against a case file, pushing it into a neater arrangement. “Though I don’t find the profile to be terribly accurate. You have made certain observations that contradict what they’ve decided they’re looking for.”

Will kept his mouth shut, trying to push away the words that wanted to surface so easily. He really didn’t buy the FBI’s profiling, but as he wasn’t actually trained in this particular field, who was he to criticise what they’d written?

“I think there’s…” he trailed off.

“Yes?”

“I don’t think he’s working alone.”
“What makes you say that?”

“This one.” He pulled a file out of the stack, the Habe case, and then selected a second one, the Bakhsh case. “There were notes made in both of these that the cutting technique was different than the others. Like he regressed in skill. Someone who had medical training and guidance, but this wasn’t…professional. Not like his other victims. The FBI thinks they’re copycat killers, but I don’t agree.”

“It could be an impostor,” Hannibal suggested.

“No, the design is his. But…maybe he’s working with a partner.” Will sighed. “Or maybe his hand was injured those nights and he got sloppy. I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do,” Hannibal insisted, pushing him to say the truth.

“There are two of them.” He swallowed hard as the image of a single killer split into two, Will standing beside himself. “The Chesapeake Ripper isn’t a ‘he’—it’s a ‘they’.” He gave a humourless laugh. “Two psychos who found one another.” He looked between the assortment of files. “Sometimes they work together. But the dominant partner does all the work. He likes the control. This was his game first and his partner…just there for show.” As he sorted the files chronologically, he felt his thoughts coming faster and clearer, another detail arising that he’d not been able to see before. “And look—once the second partner entered the mix, more parts of the bodies were taken. First, the Ripper only took little trophies here and there. Now you have missing limbs, entire sets of organs taken…” He stared at the empty chest cavity of a woman seated on a bus bench. “Maybe they’re sharing the trophies. Maybe the dominant partner is gifting the submissive partner with trophies of their own.”

“What would he gain by doing that?”

Will answered that with an easy understanding. “A way to keep the submissive partner compliant. It makes they both feel important. Giving a gift to someone you love.”

“He loves his partner?”

“No—not sexually. But yes, he loves his partner. Maybe a family member or a close friend. He wouldn’t share this with just anyone.” Will frowned. “No, that can’t be right. He can’t love.”

“How do you know that, Will?”

“He’s a psychopath. He doesn’t love anyone but himself,” Will said with a tinge of oily annoyance.

Hannibal was quiet for a moment and Will could hear the gears turning in his head. “Perhaps he sees his partner as an extension of himself. Could he feel love then?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” Will shrugged slightly. “He loves that partner like a trophy, then. Something he’s won. An accomplishment.”

Hannibal tapped his fingers on the table between them, a sign that he was annoyed and as Will tried to guess at what had annoyed him (was he upset that Will was arguing about psychopaths?), he spoke. “It’s getting late.”

Will glanced up at the clock on the wall set to east coast time. “Yeah.”

Will stared down at Hannibal’s fingertips; if he held absolutely still, perhaps he wouldn’t startle the other man away. He never knew how much he lacked physical contact with others until he was
offered touch. It was like being outside in the cold—he never noticed how chilled he’d become until he stepped back inside to the warmth. If he moved his fingers a little more to the right, they’d be touching.

“We should get sleep before we land.” Hannibal stood and Will pulled his hands to his lap.

“Okay.”

“Don’t let those files take up your whole night.”

“Mnhmm.” He busied himself with straightening the files.

“Will.”

He looked up, not meeting the other man’s eyes. “I won’t.”

Hannibal began to remove his cufflinks. “I shall set my alarm for four hours from now.”

Will frowned. “Will that be enough?”

“I can rest later this afternoon.” He turned for the door that lead to the President’s sleeping quarters. “See that you get sleep, Will.”

“I will.” He was sure that both of them knew he was lying.

*****

Abigail and Marissa watched two movies that had been sent to the White House on early release for the First Family to review; naturally they were summer blockbusters that her father would never watch in a million years and had little interest for her either, but she was happy to spend the time with her best friend, not having to share her with anyone. They laughed and giggled as they walked back to the Residence, almost oblivious to the Secret Service agents trailing them. Greasy pizza had been ordered from a pizza shop not far from the White House and as she was anxious, she ate it quicker than she should have, causing her stomach to churn.

“Now lets get something to drink!” Marissa announced and Abigail quickly stood.

“You go wait in my bedroom and I’ll get you a beer. Dad moved all of them down to the downstairs kitchen.”

It was a lie and as she watched Marissa leave, she retrieved the bottle of Alana’s beer she’d been saving for this particular evening. Earlier that morning she had powdered one and a half of the sleeping tablets she’d snuck out of her father’s collection and retrieving the baggie she’d stored it in from behind her father’s tea canister, she poured it into the beer, carefully stirring until it completely dissolved, then grabbed her own cocktail of water and cranberry juice, adding just enough wine to the mix so that Marissa would be able to smell it. Abigail carried the drinks to the bedroom and found her friend flopped out on the second bed that had been brought in that morning for her guest.

“Finally,” Marissa announced dramatically as she took the bottle and began to drink heavily from it. “Ugh, this tastes skunky.”

Abigail knew she was staring, but couldn’t help herself. “Yeah.”

Marissa began to discuss their plans for the night—she was certain that they could convince the Secret Service to let them out them go drinking with a few other students from Sidwell Friends and
Abigail just waited patiently, nodding in all the right places as she made sure her friend drank the whole bottle.

Marissa’s lips curled into a scheming smile. “Okay, I’m going to go shower real quick and then we can have some fun!”

Abigail nodded. “Sure.”

Marissa’s shower was the longest ten minutes Abigail had ever spent waiting on her own; she sat on the edge her bed, sipping at her wine/water/cranberry juice, right leg bouncing anxiously. She didn’t want her friend to pass out in the shower, because she didn’t want to have to worry about her drowning, nor did she want to pull that dead weight all the way into her bedroom. When the shower finally turned off and she could hear her friend walking with wet feet on tile, she pulled out a magazine and pretended to be casually reading. The door opened and Marissa leaned in the doorway, her eyes hazy and her facial expression leaning towards confused. She was wearing a tank top and the shortest shorts Abigail thought possible for sleeping, the thin cotton clinging to still damp skin.

“I feel tired,” Marissa finally said.

Abigail nodded, her heart racing. “Take a nap.”

Marissa looked at the bed adjacent to her and nodded. “Okay.”

Marissa stumbled to the bed and fell on the mattress hard, her eyes closed and mouth slack. Abigail set her drink down and quickly went over to her friend; her fingers registered Marissa’s pulse, something safe and normal. If anything started to go wrong with Marissa, she could always get help from the medical staff downstairs. Locking the door to her bedroom, she retrieved the hunting clothes she had placed in the top drawer of her dresser that morning, quickly changing into the camouflage, tying up the laces of her boots tightly. Then she turned off the lights and returned to the bed; years of rowing and other physical training had left her strong enough to carry dead weight and the frame of her best friend wasn’t anything she was unprepared for.

Carefully she lowered Marissa to the floor, adjusting the pose of her body until she found a position that looked as though she’s fallen in the woods from her rifle. She stood above Marissa, inhaling through her nose to capture scent of damp skin and exhaling though her mouth to hear the sound of her own breathing. Then she knelt over Marissa’s body, pretending to set a rifle down on the ground beside her; firearms weren’t permitted in the Residence, which presented a huge flaw in that part of her fantasy, but her mind could accommodate for that. Abigail touched Marissa’s wet hair and grateful that her friend had decided to condition, was able to run her fingers through the thick locks without it snarling. Her hand gently rolled Marissa’s head from side to side, studying and memorising. Then she moved her hand lower to hold Marissa’s neck, to fit her thumb in the hollow at the base of her throat, to rest over her calm heart. Her fingers traced between breasts and down to the warm, soft, flat stomach, so tender and vulnerable. Abigail felt her breath hitch and she caressed through the cloth, reminding herself that she needed to be patient, that she would be rewarded soon.

She rolled Marissa to lie completely flat on her back and positioned her arms out, crucified, then straddled her stomach, heart racing at the feeling of her hunting trousers tight on her thighs. Her hands once more returned to her friend’s hair, sliding in and pulling her up so that she could taste her. Abigail kissed Marissa deeply, running her fingers through that thick, dark hair, twisting up the strands. She licked and tasted and eventually figured out how to manipulate Marissa’s tongue into her mouth. She knew she couldn’t do anything that would leave evidence of their time together, so she brought her teeth down around Marissa’s tongue just enough to see what it felt like, never biting.
She was breathing heavily through her nose and when Marissa gave a sleepy moan, her eyes rolled back in her head. ‘Me, too. I’m enjoying it, too.’ She finally pulled away and lowered her friend back down to the carpet and lifting herself up slightly, pulled the tank top up and over Marissa’s breasts, wanting bare skin against the rough canvas camouflage vest she wore. Abigail shifted and then lowered herself over her friend’s unconscious form, crouched and feeling very much like a wolf. She was a killer and Marissa was a satisfying conquest; Abigail kissed and licked a trail up and down Marissa’s vulnerable neck, the skin clean and fresh. It was wonderful. She’d imagined for years how her friend would taste, but had never really had any point of reference aside from her own skin. She laved the skin dampened by her still wet hair, wishing she could suck and mark the other girl, to claim ownership of her. She wanted to devour all of her greedily here in her room, drinking in the thick blood and gorging on the hot flesh.

Her hand squeezed and touched Marissa’s side, mind categorising what each organ was that lie beneath the barrier of skin; liver, kidneys, stomach, pancreas, smooth pink lungs…she shuddered. She wouldn’t want to cook a single thing—she’d eat her raw, possibly not even chewing. Unlike her father, she wanted to consume every bit of her friend without the social niceties or pretenses of beauty. And she sure as hell wouldn’t share her. No, Marissa wasn’t made for the dinner table or kitchen. She belonged to the earth and forest, she was meant to be reduced to a pile of bones and laid out amongst leaves and mushrooms, bleached white and eternal.

She wondered what it would be like to cut her open and stick her hand into the warmth of her chest cavity. She’d want to pick the coldest day of the year so that when her knife opened up the soft flesh, steam would rise, clouds escaping the heaven of her mortal form, dissipating to become the air that Abigail breathed. And maybe she’d want Marissa breathing for that moment, too. She’d be able to watch the scream forming on her mouth and Abigail could shush her, murmur soft words to tell her that they’d be together forever, this was just the beginning.

“I want to honour every part,” she admitted in a soft whisper.

She didn’t have access to her hunting knife here in the Residence, so she was left using her scissors to take what she wanted. Pulling the scissors out of her vest pocket, Abigail cut off a small lock of hair, no longer than an inch and slipped it into a small plastic sandwich bag; she’d add it to her fly tying station later.

In the morning, Marissa awakened somewhat confused, but also apologetic for falling asleep so early in the night. Abigail, always an understanding friend, assured Marissa that it wasn’t a big deal and maybe she should consider not staying up so late? Marissa agreed and Abigail smiled, tucking her friend away in her memory palace.
Chapter Twenty-One

{Meet me @ parking lot pls}

Will looked over the text message curiously, standing up from his desk. Alana rarely texted him anything that was personal and he had no idea why he’d be needed in the parking lot of all places. Glancing out his office windows, he decided to forego bringing his umbrella with him; the late June sky was threatening another rain shower and it was still early enough in the morning that getting caught in weather would be cold and not refreshing. Hannibal was in Jack’s office and Will knew he should alert his employer where he was headed, but he hated interrupting meetings between the two men and settled on taking the risk to see what Alana wanted without saying anything.

Nodding politely to various ushers and Secret Service agents that all greeted him ‘good morning’, he found Alana standing by her car; she was texting someone and while he enjoyed whatever it was that was going on between the President and himself, he still felt a tightness in his stomach whenever he saw the woman.

“Hello, Alana,” he called out and she looked up, smiling.

“Hey, Will.” She opened the backseat of her car and pulled out something rectangular and wrapped in heavy brown packaging paper. “Bedelia had me pick this up this morning. She said Hannibal had asked for it.”

“What is it?” He hadn’t heard anything from Hannibal about needing something—wasn’t it his job to get things?

She handed it over. “A painting. He moved it to her place for storage while he’s here.”

“I’ll make sure he gets it.” He held it carefully, now able to feel the frame underneath the paper. “So you had to go all the way to Boring to get this?”

There’s a body at the bottom of the boathouse.

Her smile broadened. “Yes, and thankfully it was a nice drive.”

“Wonder what it is,” Will mused.

“I don’t know.” She pressed the small remote on her keychain to lock her car, eyes glancing up to the sky. “I’ll see you later, all right?”

He started to open his mouth to ask her to have lunch with him later, but she was already walking briskly towards the White House, dialing a number on her phone and bringing it to her ear. Will decided to keep the offer to himself and instead turned his attention to the painting. Carrying it back to his office, he slipped it safely in the space between his desk and the wall, knowing it was completely protected from any damage that might befall it.

Mother Jones’ magazine had just published a special edition on the Lecter administration, asking if this was ‘Actual Change in Washington?’, speculating on the very liberal way Hannibal ran the White House. Will felt ‘liberal’ was an understatement—Washington DC hadn’t seen this kind of government overhaul in ages. There were captions about how Lecter takes time out of his day to personally call mayors in small towns across the US to find out what they need’, ‘VP Du Maurier doesn’t sit back idly—she’s her cousin’s right hand (wo)man’, and ‘A president who means business —running the country like an enterprise’. Hannibal’s history as a doctor was a major influence as to
the organisation and structure of the administration’s hierarchy—specialists headed up the part of the cabinet they were best skilled for and not because they were friends of the President as so many previous leaders had done. Hannibal did not tolerate anyone there to make a name and had ‘requested’ resignations almost fifty people in various sectors of White House since his inauguration, having their replacements on location before they’d even had a chance to clean out their desks. It had caused a lot of bitter feelings among the various political entities and Will had the constant need to look over his shoulder for anyone looking to take the President out, but the American people loved it. The fact that Hannibal wasn’t beholden to any particular person or group and had been so transparent about it. Will knew that the fact he was financially able to serve his own agenda had been a part of why he didn’t make decisions that entered into grey territory, but because of a sense of integrity. Will’s skin warmed at the thought of Hannibal only finding satisfaction in doing the right thing.

And the way he sought to correct what was wrong—Will could dedicate an entire course at GWU to that alone. His methodology reminded Will of a trauma surgeon—find the damage, go in, fix it. Sometimes it was ugly, occasionally painful, but the results showed almost overnight and government slowly began to heal itself. Doctor to a sick and damaged nation—perhaps MedScape had been right to have Hannibal pose in his doctor’s coat and stethoscope. Will supposed that made him…well, it still made him an assistant. The one who gloved hands and handed scalpels over.

“Will?”

Will looked up to see his political infatuation standing in the doorway of his office. “Alana brought over a painting…”

Hannibal accepted painting Will removed from its space and Hannibal motioned for Will to follow. “We should take it to the Residence to be hung up.”

Will wondered what his meeting with Jack had been about; he sensed that Hannibal was attempting to put distance between himself and the Oval Office. “So what is it?”

“Something I picked up during a summer vacation to Rome in my early twenties.”

“Ah. Was your taste in art as good or still being developed?” Will asked, trying to distract Hannibal; there were tension lines in the older man’s face and it made him uncomfortable.

This seemed the right thing to say as Hannibal gave him a glance and his tone was a shade more relaxed. “It has always been good.”

Will smiled encouragingly, but they were silent until they reached the second floor of the Residence. “We are taking it to the bedroom, somewhere Alana can’t see it,” Hannibal told him and Will nodded as though he understood.

The painting was placed on the bed and Hannibal went to a utility closet in the kitchen for a toolbox. Will’s mind was still somewhere in the Mother Jones article, wondering what anyone would think about the President leaving work to go hang a painting, but he supposed where one man might play basketball to unwind, another might find distraction in small tasks. With the results Hannibal produced, did it really matter that he wasn’t conventional?

Will wasn’t thinking when he began removing the heavy brown paper off the frame, more focused on the task of getting it on the wall than the fact that it might be wrapped for reasons other than protection during transport.
“Oh,” he said breathlessly as he looked down at the painting.

Hannibal’s voice was against his ear, making him flinch—he hadn’t heard the President come up to stand behind him. “‘Leda and the Swan’ by François Boucher. I always thought it had some real heat in the fucking.”

Will had to avert his eyes, his face reddening. He nearly made a comment about actual lack of ‘fucking’, but honestly, the offering of Leda’s body, the look of expectant bliss, the posturing of the mythological characters’ bodies suggested only one possible outcome and it was heat. He stepped back from the bed, careful not to bump into Hannibal in the process, his mind completely on fire and overrun with sex and mythology. This was worse than when he accidentally found one of his dad’s Playboys under the driver’s seat of their truck.

“So what part of the Oval Office are we putting this in?” he finally asked when he found his voice.

“Above the fire place so I can look at it while listening to Jack telling me about the FOX News correspondents latest conspiracy regarding the rigged election.” Will stared at Hannibal’s deadpan expression until the other man finally smiled. “A joke, my dear Will. This must go somewhere only I can see it. Alana has never been fond of it and I imagine it would be quite the spectacle if I left in the open.”

“I imagine it would,” Will echoed, swallowing hard.

Hannibal actually let out a laugh.

Will glanced over to the side of the room. “The back of the closet.”

“You read my mind.”

Will doubted it was empathy that told him it was the only logical place to place the lewd painting. “Above the dresser?”

Hannibal brought over the toolbox and as Will hadn’t been able to to spend much time doing handyman work at his own home, he was quick to offer his services.

“I can do that if you want.”

Hannibal surrendered the tools and Will set about taking out the stud finder to locate a place to put a nail in the wall, narrating what he was doing, lest Hannibal question his judgement. Hannibal stood in the doorway of the closet, watching him work.

“So Alana isn’t fond of this painting,” Will finally said, knowing it was rhetorical.

“No,” the President agreed.

“Where was it originally?” he asked, feeling a sudden unease that Alana knew of it because she’d seen it somewhere private, like a bedroom.

“In the dining room of my home in Baltimore.”

“In—in your dining room?” he sputtered.

Before he could get an explanation, there was a knock on the door and Jack walked in.

“Hannibal, Bedelia has—“ Jack stopped, frowning as he looked between Will and the President. “What are you doing?”
“Hanging a painting,” Will snapped defensively, hoping that Jack wasn’t seeing what painting was on Hannibal’s bed.

“Okay, you know that we have people for that.” Jack looked as though he was biting his tongue from saying more, keeping his words limited to what he actually had to tell Hannibal. “When you’re finished, Bedelia has the papers she wants you to sign.”

“Thank you, Jack. Please tell Bedelia I’ll be down shortly,” Hannibal said politely, as if that was Jack’s job to run his small errands and not Will’s.

Jack left, grumbling under his breath, and Will smirked, turning to look at Hannibal. Alone again, Hannibal left and retrieved the painting, passing it over for Will to hang on the wall.

“Alana made you take it down.” Will could only imagine her face upon seeing it where she had to eat.

“She suggested,” he said neutrally.

“Because Abigail came to live with you.”

There was something unexpectedly teasing in Hannibal’s tone. “Very good, Will.”

“I don’t know if this is something I would have picked out in my twenties,” Will mused quietly as he straightened the frame.

Hannibal’s voice was behind him again. “No, you would have found a poster of a nice boat.”

Lips touched the side of Will’s neck and he let out a small noise of shocked protest, flinching away from the contact, but before he left the small and now claustrophobic space, he gave an annoyed smile to the other man.

*****

As disciplined a man he was, Hannibal was not ignorant of impatience. For many of his projects and tasks he could wait forever, and was often forced to now that the dynamics of his own privacy had changed so greatly, but what he was doing with Will was dragging out past the point of delayed gratification and into the type of need that would make him start taking unnecessary risks. And now that he’d seen how beautiful his humiliation looked when something sexual was put in front of him, he knew he couldn’t deny himself any longer—he couldn’t stay sated with just shy, schoolboy kisses Will limited him to.

“Why are you smiling?” Will asked as they sat together in the Oval Office, sorting through public policy issues he would be announcing the White House stance on during his July Fourth address to the nation; Will was trying to remain serious, however he looked close to risking a smile as well.

“I would like to extend an invitation to you for dinner tonight. Unless you’re busy.” Hannibal hadn’t actually formed a solid or definitive plan to get Will to himself and an offer for dinner was what came naturally to his lips.

Will looked back down at the folders, feigning nonchalance. “I’d be more than happy to cancel all my previous plans of eating a frozen dinner and rereading a paperback.”

“I agree that we can find more interesting ways to entertain ourselves.”

Of course the innuendo went right past Will and Hannibal smiled wolfishly as the younger man
pulled out his phone and said he’d text the dog walker to swing by his house to feed and walk his dogs again. Hannibal wondered if he felt guilt anymore for leaving them so eagerly in return for human companionship. Will walked out of the office, completely distracted, and Hannibal allowed it, needing the privacy for himself as well. Once he heard the faint sound of Will’s office door closing, Hannibal picked up the phone and pressed the button that immediately connected him to his daughter’s office.

“Hello, President Lecter,” Abigail answered pleasantly; he imagined her smiling.

“Abigail, are you still interested in going to that concert?”

He could hear her voice become a bit breathless, no doubt trying to contain her enthusiasm while trying to determine what he wanted of her. “Yes, I am.”

“Why don’t you invite your Aunt Bee to attend with you?”

“Oh gosh, Aunt Bee would hate it,” she said eagerly.

“Have Georgia and her mother coordinate tickets for the two of you, and you may spend the night at her house tonight,” he instructed her.

“Why are you allowing me to go?” she asked curiously.

“I will be focused on dinner tonight.”

She made a small noise, her realisation that this was about Will and her voice became polite. “Oh, well thank you very much. I hope that your dinner is everything you want it to be.”

He smiled, unable to help himself. “I’m sure it shall be.”

*****

When Will returned to the Residence that evening, he was hungry and hoping for distraction; his muscles were tense, partially a reaction to his annoyance at Hannibal kissing him in the closet that afternoon and at the additional and confusing informational input of seeing the Leda and the Swan painting—his mind was unsure where to catalogue it in his knowledge of the President. Was it humour? Was it something cruder or uglier? And the way he’d whispered into Will’s ear had been too much, the words lingering against Will’s skin.

Some real heat in the fucking.

He found Hannibal finishing plating the food in the kitchen and he knew he’d spent too much time hiding in the parking lot as he tried to think of things other than Hannibal whispering filthy things to him.

“Where’s Abigail?” he asked, not stopping to think it was rude of him not to at least greet the President first.

“With Bedelia. They’re going to a concert tonight and she’ll be staying the night.” Hannibal removed his apron. “Tonight we shall dine in the greenhouse.”

“What’s for dinner?” Will took a step closer to the counter to look at what had been cooked.

“Stuffed braised lamb heart with vanilla glazed peaches.” Hannibal spooned something thick over the slices of meat.
The sauce drizzled over the meat looked oddly familiar and he asked, “Is that chocolate?”

“Yes. I find the sweetness accentuates the flavour of the meat.”

“Different.” Will quickly added, “In a good way.”

Hannibal smiled. “You will enjoy it.”

“I enjoy everything you cook.”

“I am flattered, Will.”

“You’re very good at it.”

The other man bowed his head humbly and took the plates from the counter. “Thank you.”

“Want any help?”

“No, you may simply accompany me to our destination.”

Will followed and opened the door to the greenhouse once they reached it, ignoring any rooftop agent that might be looking their way. Inside the greenhouse, the small garden table had been set up with wine glasses and place settings, the light of the full moon above them illuminating the glass room. They sat together and Will waited patiently before taking the first bite, avoiding the eyes watching him.

“It’s good.” Will felt his cheeks get hot at the base satisfaction he felt getting fed good food.

Hannibal’s smile returned and Will knew he wasn’t imagining the way the other man quietly delighted in his praise. They ate in silence for the most part, only speaking towards the end of the meal, but it was comfortable. Will was too focused on appreciating the food and pushing away any thoughts that weren’t fair to have about the other man. He wondered what Hannibal thought about him after this afternoon.

“Do you ever miss being a doctor?” Will asked instead.

“I transferred my passion for anatomy into the culinary arts.”

Will supposed that being a hunter and his own butcher made it easier to appreciate the food from start to finish. He appreciated the fish he cooked for himself because he caught and gutted them himself. If he had the culinary skills Hannibal possessed, he would probably enjoy elaborately making himself dinner as well.

Food consumed and nothing but the quiet chirp of crickets and the buzz of a stray cicada, Will stretched his neck and glanced over to see the President looking at him intently.

“Are you always this tense, Will?” Hannibal asked.

“This is my base line for relaxed.” Will gave a defeated sigh.

Hannibal frowned slightly. “I need to fix that. Always wound up.”

“You wind me up. And you watch me go.”

Hannibal paused in bringing his glass to his lips. “I do all this to you?”
“Yes.” Feeling a bit bolder, Will added, “And you know you do.”

Hannibal’s eyes looked delighted. “You caught me.”

“Caught you,” Will echoed and finished the last of his wine, unbuttoning the top button of his shirt.

“Are you warm, Will?”

“It’s humid in here,” Will admitted.

“I suppose it is,” Hannibal mused softly. “Shall we prepare dessert?”

“Why not?”

Carrying their night’s place settings downstairs, Hannibal began to wash the dishes and Will re-corked the wine bottle placing it in the fridge; finding a clean dish towel, he stood at the President’s side to dry and put away what they’d used.

“You don’t have to, Will. You are my guest tonight.”

“I can help,” Will protested, wanting to release the other man to start on whatever confection they’d be enjoying. Will would never admit that Hannibal’s cooking had given him something of a sweet tooth.

“Thank you for your assistance, Will.”

“I know you can’t leave a messy kitchen…” He shifted slightly at the close proximity of the other man coming to stand behind him. There was a soft noise, an inhale that Will was waiting for and his lips parted slightly as he heard it. “Did you just smell me?”

He didn’t know what the point of asking was as the question was simply rhetorical. He could practically hear the Hannibal’s smile on his lips.

“Yes.”

Hands came down to touch his waist, lingering but doing nothing more and in as steady a voice he could manage, he murmured, “Why?”

The President’s voice was low against his ear. “Your aftershave.”

Will turned around, still caught between the other man and the counter; Hannibal wasn’t smiling any longer, but there was that gleam in his eyes that always indicated he was planning something and Will suspected the he was subject of those thoughts. The dish towel was removed from his hand and Will nodded his head slightly as though he understood what was happening, an agreement to a question not yet asked.

“Oh,” he whispered already following Hannibal out of the kitchen.

His body was hungry, his mind was hungry—the dinner hadn’t been about food, it had been a seduction, one to comfort and relax him, but leave him wanting more. Foreplay. Heart pounding in his chest he reached the shut door of the Presidential bedroom, the other man rounded to look at him.

“Dr Lecter,” he choked out; he didn’t know where the need for formality came from or why in that particular form, but his mind was moving almost faster than he could keep up and he knew that if he didn’t speak now, he’d not get a chance to later--
“You can call me Hannibal.”

Will grabbed onto Hannibal’s wrists tightly, needing to make it clear that he had no idea what he was doing. “I-I don’t…”

Hannibal gave him a look that was neither pitying or mocking; he understood the words left unsaid. “Not tonight.”

Will shivered at the unspoken promise. *But soon.*

Hannibal’s hands once released found the doorway through the bedroom and he allowed Will to walk in first; then the door was shut and Will felt as though his feet were grounded, unable to walk any further into the dark room. To the side the closet door was open and Will tapped his fingertips on the doorframe, before turning his attention Hannibal.

"May I, Will?" Hannibal asked in the same way he asked to enter Will’s office.

Will nodded and as they kissed, Hannibal began to undress the two of them; Will attempted to offer help, accepting the ties he was handed, which he draped carefully in the valet tray. Next came the President’s cufflinks—’*Did he put these on for dinner with me?’*—and both of their watches, which Will secretly found to be disorienting, because he wore it almost 24/7. His shirt was unbuttoned before Hannibal’s came to touch his belt and he bucked against the sudden contact, eyes flashing open widely. Hannibal’s eyes opened to look into his and Will found himself pressed back against the doorframe of the, the President pressing his hips against Will’s as he continued to remove his belt. It seemed Hannibal had the foresight not to wear one and as he removed it, Will reached out to unbutton the other man’s waistcoat. When his efforts were not rebuffed, he ran his hands between the layers of fabric to remove it; Hannibal never once ceased kissing him as he shifted his shoulders and arms to slide the waistcoat off. Will tried to fold it in half the best he could with the distractions he faced and set it on the dresser before reaching up to touch the other man’s shoulders.

Thankful his shoes tonight were the leather slip-ons he’d bought last month and he slipped his feet out of them easily, nudging them towards the closet where they’d be out of the way and pulled his body closer to Hannibal’s, wanting more. They rocked for a moment in tandem, Will breathing hard as he held Hannibal’s face between his hands, processing that their bodies were so close, that he had time to turn away from what was being offered to him. Then they were kissing again and he assisted Hannibal in unbuttoning the pale yellow shirt he had worn for their dinner as Hannibal began to unbutton and unzip his chinos. Will stepped out of the trousers, pushing Hannibal backwards to the other side of the doorframe, gently, but fumbling. His hands picked at the other man’s trousers, pulling their hips apart long enough unzip the fly, wanting to reach down and feel Hannibal’s erection through the cloth, but still worried about making all the wrong moves.

He withdrew and leaned back against the space on the doorframe he’d originally occupied, watching as Hannibal brought one leg up to undo the laces of his oxfords, eyes locked onto Will’s. His shoes eventually came to rest neatly beside Will’s in the front of the closet entrance. It seemed only logical to just strip at this point and even with all the apprehension, Will couldn’t help but eagerly strip out of the rest of his clothes, the primal instinct to get naked and close with another willing body too much to override. He did, however, pause when he turned to face Hannibal and found him naked, averting his eyes from the prominent erection. He’d never had sex with another man and he hated watching porn and his brain began to overheat at the realisation of how *good* Hannibal looked like that—naked and patient because of *him*.

"You're trembling, Will."

“It’s, it’s just nerves.”
Hannibal made a small noise of agreement and pulled at Will’s shorts, delicately, with the hands of a surgeon, folding the material down as he kissed along Will’s jaw. Will shut his eyes, not needing the sight of someone appraising him with such depthless eyes. And then Hannibal had his hand around him, rubbing his thumb across Will’s glans and he let out a soft groan, rolling his hips into the hold.

Will allowed himself to be directed to the bed, his shorts sliding down off his hips at some point to be left on the floor, their lips hungrily against one another the entire time; Will could taste wine and what was left of the chocolate sauce from the stuffed hearts—’Fuck, the whole dinner had been themed for this’—and as he was pressed onto his back, Will gave a soft, needy whimper, turning his head away; he’d much rather bare his neck than have to actually look Hannibal in the eyes. Hannibal took the opportunity to cradle one hand under Will’s neck as he began to softly kiss along the exposed skin. The kissing evolved into gentle sucking and Will’s eyes fluttered as his body responded gratefully. Hannibal’s hand eventually pulled out from under Will’s neck and his long fingers found their way to Will’s lips, tracing gently along the wet skin until Will surrendered and parted them. His fingers still had the light scent of the kitchen’s soap. Will sucked, responding almost instinctually to the entirety of Hannibal’s body against his.

Hannibal’s other hand pressed down to his stomach, fingertips slowly feeling the outlines of muscles or perhaps his full stomach and Will could faintly make out Hannibal’s jaw working, which made sense a moment later when he brought his hand up, licking his hand wet with saliva and then brought it back down between their bodies; the sculpted fingers closed around him, slick, and Will shuddered as the other man, nearly biting the fingers against his teeth. Hannibal withdrew that particular hand, bringing the wet fingers to rest behind Will’s neck, holding him still as their mouths met once more; the politician’s thumb swirled around their heads and Hannibal’s lips pressed softly against the corner of Will’s mouth, allowing him space to breathe.

Will’s hands were planted firmly on the bed, completely unsure where he was supposed to place them; no, this needed to be reciprocated and Will brought one hand up to his mouth, licking the palm to mimic the other man’s actions and then brought it down to touch Hannibal, to take hold of his cock in what he hoped was a sure manner. Hannibal exhaled softly and Will tentatively began to bring his fist up and down, making small notes at the differences between Hannibal and himself. His pace was a bit quicker, desperate tugs he’d grown accustomed to because that was what touching himself was like—a need to just get it over with—and he flinched as Hannibal’s hand pulled back for a moment to lick at his fingertips, no doubt tasting the precome Will had been leaking and he gasped at the thought of someone tasting him.

Then wet fingers reached back down not to touch at his cock, but to caress and hold his balls instead. Will let out a small noise, thrusting up for any kind of friction; Hannibal kissed and sucked against his neck as he continued to roll them and Will’s hand squeezed tighter, thumb tracing over a slick head that was perfect. Will’s gasps sounded wet and terrified and slowly dragged into something altogether more guttural and low as he loosened his hold enough on Hannibal to grab him as gently as he could by the hair to desperately bring his mouth the other man’s once more, scared of cracking teeth together, scared of needing too much. But Hannibal didn’t deny him anything, allowing Will to take and circled his fingers around him once more. He moaned loudly into Hannibal’s mouth, his breathing coming in short gasps. Hannibal pulled away and Will was embarrassed at how rushed and erratic his hand was moving to jerk the other man off, but he was so close, he wanted nothing more that to feel himself spill across those beautiful fingers and into that smooth, broad palm, to have his body so close and hot—

“Look at me, William.”

‘He hasn’t smiled once since we got into his bedroom,’ Will noted absently and brought his gaze to Hannibal’s.
Hannibal’s lips parted slightly, giving a small nod to Will—as if Will actually needed encouragement—but Will took it as just that and suddenly found himself arching upwards, making a choked noise as he came into the other man’s fist. In the dark, Hannibal’s eyes were hidden in shadow and nothing had ever felt so dangerous and familiar as seeking them out while he rode out the last crashing wave of his orgasm.

Hannibal’s breath hitched for a moment, still watching Will’s face as he bit his lips, orgasm almost silent and incredibly composed; if Will had been paying more attention, he might have noticed that Hannibal had little change in his expression, but for the moment he was too busy catching his breath, letting out a soft moan at the feeling of the other man coming across his own spent cock and stomach, making his hand filthy.

Hannibal collapsed on the bed beside him, head facing him as Will stared at a dark ceiling, wiping his fingers against the bedsheets without thinking.

“I…”

“Stay,” Hannibal murmured.

And Will finally smiled, nodding slowly. Hannibal leant in, capturing his lips once more, and Will inhaled, smelling their sex and the President’s aftershave.

****

Will awoke to the sound of a phone ringing, though his eyelids were still too heavy to open all the way and he groped around on the side table for his phone. It wasn’t until he felt the movement of Hannibal removing his own phone off the opposite table that he realised he hadn’t gone to bed alone—hell, he hadn’t even gone to bed in his own bed—and he sat up abruptly as the other man spoke.

“Good evening, Jack.” There was a slight pause and Will rubbed at his eyes, everything blurry from the dark and sleep. “I see. I shall be down shortly.” There was a knock on the door. “Please come in,” Hannibal called out, then continued speaking to the man on the other end. “Yes, the agent is here. I shall see you in twenty minutes.” Hannibal ended the call and turned to look at Will, ignoring the shadowy figure standing in the doorway to act as an escort downstairs. “I’m sorry. I am needed downstairs.”

“Everything okay?” he asked quietly.

“Egypt. Please go back to sleep. I shall return in a few hours.” He turned to look at the agent in the room and pulled throw blanket off the end of the bed, wrapping it around his waist before announcing, “I will be ten minutes.”

“Yes, Mr President.”

Hannibal left the room leaving Will alone with only who could be Agent Zeller; the man gave Will an acknowledging nod, but seemed indifferent to the sight of him in Hannibal’s bedroom. Will was grateful for the near complete darkness on his half of the room, not wanting to see the other man’s expression; Will was very aware that he made the man uncomfortable and didn’t need to add this to the mix.

“I didn’t realise you worked night shift,” Will mumbled, half hoping Zeller wouldn’t hear him.

“Someone needed to switch hours for tonight,” the agent said casually. “So how long have the two of you…I’m not asking to be nosey. It’s about security—you’ll have to be covered by different security procedures now.”
Will knew that Zeller was right, but having his personal life being the focus of security measures irked him and he said stiffly, “It became official at about eight thirty over dinner this evening.”

“Okay. Just make sure you both deal with it in the security office in the morning.” Zeller shifted in his stance and in a lower tone added, “No one will say anything. Everyone already thought you were. And the code of honour to keep your mouth shut as an agent is more sacred than anything. We’d rather get shot than betray our oath.”

Will tried to smile but it came out as a grimace. “Good to know.”

“And Abigail?”

Will hadn’t expected that question and after a moment of feeling the urge to shout at him to get out of the room, he managed a tight, “You know Hannibal wouldn’t do this if she wouldn’t be okay with it.”

“She likes you.”

Will relaxed slightly. “I hope so.”

Zeller’s eyes flicked down at the floor, then returned to their neutral gaze at the wall. “Get better underwear, Will. This is the President we’re talking about.”

Hannibal returned to the room looking impossibly composed for such a short amount of time. “Agent Zeller,” he said politely, then turned back to the bed. “Go back to sleep, Will.”

Within seconds, Will was left alone in the dark room once more; lying back down, he slowly began to count backwards from one hundred.

*****

On a subconscious level, Will was aware when Hannibal returned to bed, feeling him slip under the sheets and holding Will close.

*****

Will had become so accustomed to waking at the early hours of the morning that he managed to do so without the sound of the alarm on his phone, though the small beeping noise was what convinced him open his eyes and finally move. After he shut off the phone, he rolled over on his side and turned to look at the man in bed with him; Hannibal was awake and watching him, which made Will look away for a moment before glancing back.

“Good morning,” Will murmured.

Hannibal offered him an eased smile. “Good morning.”

“Everything okay in Egypt?”

Hannibal reached out and brushed Will’s curls out of his eyes. “As Egypt goes.”

Will swallowed. “So the Secret Service knows.”

“I have made it clear that our relationship does not need to be made public to anyone. Secret Service and Jack will be the only ones who know.”

“What about Abigail?”
“You know she wants us to be a family.”

“So you both planned for this.” He didn’t have to ask, because he knew enough about the clever Lecters that they would capably orchestrate the details of their lives; Will had probably been moving too slow for Hannibal’s liking.

“She thought perhaps I should have a night alone with you. And morning.” Hannibal’s hand crept onto Will’s stomach and Will looked over his shoulder to the still open closet door.

“Oh.”

Hannibal lifted his head slightly, forcing eye contact. “Will, if you are not comfortable…”

Will swallowed hard and in an effort to buy himself time, said, “I’d, I’d like to at least brush my teeth.”

“Of course.” Hannibal pulled away, his eye still focused on him.

Will stood in front of the bathroom mirror, splashing his face with water and then squeezed toothpaste onto a finger, running it over his teeth; he had considered using the President’s toothbrush but didn’t feel comfortable taking such a liberty, so he scrubbed with his fingertip instead. Then he decided to wash his face more thoroughly and sighed.

God, why did this have to be so awkward?

He returned to the bed, slipping under the sheets and drawing his knees up, wrapping his arms around his legs. The only thing he regretted about the night before was the fact he had no idea what to do now that it was morning. Sex, oh they were definitely going to fuck now, but he had no idea how to proceed.

“I’ve um, never…”

He didn’t finish the sentence as he stared to the closed doors that led to the living room. His inexperience was obvious and he’d disclosed it the night before, but he hoped that Hannibal wouldn’t hold it against him.

“Do you want to?” Hannibal asked curiously, still lying on his side.

His reply was quick. “Yes.”

“It will give us time to explore from the beginning, then. I would not want to rush with you. You are worth every ounce of patience and waiting spent.”

Will turned to glance down at him. The room was still dark enough that he didn’t have to pretend faking eye contact. “You’re not needed anywhere?”

“I would like to be needed by you. Here.”

Will nodded, completely unsure how this could actually be happening to him. Hannibal took his hands, pulling him back down onto the bed beside him.

“Anything you want, Will. I will give anything you want.” The older man kissed him gently.

“You don’t want that,” he murmured.

“Anything,” Hannibal reiterated against his lips.
“Anything.” That kind of power was dizzying and everything he’d ever thought about the President filled his mind. “I want…”

Hannibal’s lips quirked slightly, understanding immediately what it was Will would never directly ask for. “You wish—"

“Yes,” Will whispered.

Hannibal nodded once, thumb tracing a path down the centre of Will’s stomach. “We’re both clean.”

“You looked at my medical chart?”

“Yes.” Hannibal’s eyes met his. “Was I wrong to?”

Will shook his head. Hannibal had seen his fucked up brain scans—the results of his physicals really didn’t bother him. “I’ve never…”

He trailed a hand down hesitantly the other man’s stomach—he was unsure if he was delaying the inevitable or trying to give Hannibal the chance to back out. But the President wasn’t someone who backed out and Will was very aware of that.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” That much was true. Will couldn’t remember ever trusting someone in the way he trusted Hannibal, even if there were small imperfections he’d noticed about him; Hannibal was what his mind carefully boxed and labeled as ‘stability’, and if there was ever anyone to venture into this uncharted territory with, it was him.

“We shall go slowly,” Hannibal promised him.

Will had no fucking idea what he was doing with his hands, he concluded after ten minutes of trying to feel the President up; all of Hannibal’s touches were calculated and exploring—Will’s simply groping at any part that interested him. As he was about to become frustrated with himself, he was turned onto his back and Hannibal straddled him. Somehow he’d expected Hannibal to be resistant to the thought of being the receiving partner; people in power really didn’t like the thought of ‘being fucked’ by someone, especially in the literal sense and it wouldn’t have been unsurprising for Hannibal to be the same way, needing to exert control and dominance.

Will supposed his major hangup was that he didn’t know how to properly know understand what he wanted; he was shit at giving and even worse at asking. Orgasm, yes, but beyond that he didn’t actually like the human interaction aspect because it required talking and expectations. He watched with a sinking feeling as Hannibal leaned away from him, reaching over for the nightstand—‘Probably going to say he’s got a message on his phone and needs to leave,’— and was prepared to be told that they could try again later, a polite and gentle rejection—

“We’ll need this.” Hannibal resettled in Will’s lap, holding a bottle of lubricant. It looked expensive—packaging minimalistic and the gold writing in French.

“Oh, yes,” he whispered as Will brought his hands up to grip onto muscular thighs.

Of course he had this planned for. What didn’t he plan for?

“Fingers, Will.”

Will offered out his hand, propping himself upon an elbow. Hannibal opened the lid and poured a
thick, fragrant liquid onto Will’s fingers, then poured some into his own palm and reached between their bodies to coat Will’s cock, eliciting a sharp inhale of air from Will, and then brought his hand up to languidly stroke at himself. Will swallowed hard and placed his slick fingers between Hannibal’s legs, seeking out the space he was expected to occupy soon. He pressed his index finger against the tight skin and within short order it yielded to him; Will moved as slowly as possible, suddenly very conscious of how much pain he could cause if he wasn’t careful.

Will watched as Hannibal shifted himself into the most comfortable position and then murmured for another. Will obliged and carefully introduced a second finger, so gentle, and he pressed a kiss to Hannibal’s chest, sitting up enough to rest his free hand on the other man’s back as he whispered reassurance into his skin. Hannibal’s hands came to rest on Will’s shoulders and Will breathed softly against his skin before lying back down. He stroked his head eagerly as he watched Hannibal fucking himself on his fingers; he was gorgeous and Will wondered if he’d ever be able to get hard to the thought of anyone else.

A third finger soon entered the equation and when he found the right angle, he soon found that he could extract small and pleased gasps, so he spent a fair amount of time curling his fingers to find Hannibal’s prostate and exploit it mercilessly. Finally, Hannibal pulled off his fingers and asked, “Are you ready, Will?”

Will couldn’t see how’d they’d possibly spent enough time to get Hannibal ready for anything and he tried to hide any feelings of helplessness. “If you are.”

“I am.” Hannibal leaned down to kiss Will deeply, his cock pressing against Will’s stomach. When he sat up, Will hesitantly spread his legs slightly and positioned his cock, his free hand rubbing in a reassuring way along Hannibal’s thigh. Will wasn’t sure where to watch—Hannibal’s face? His hand and cock?—so he simply tossed his head back and panted as Hannibal lowered himself slowly, feeling the raw heat of the other man’s body begin to surround him.

“Oh, yes,” he groaned.

Fully seated, Hannibal didn’t move until Will looked back up at him; he had a triumphant smile on his face, his cheeks tinged slightly pink. Will’s hands gripped his hips, trying to orient himself in the moment as he ran his fingers up the other man’s sides; Hannibal began to move and he let out a shuddering breath as Hannibal shifted, swirled, and lifted his hips. He was left speechless momentarily as his body instinctually thrust up, wanting as much of the sensation as possible.

“Is—do you—“ he huffed out a shocked noise before remembering what he’d wanted to ask. “Do you need more—“

He reached out to find the bottle on the nightstand or the bed—where had Hannibal set it? “No, but thank you, Will” Hannibal said appreciatively as he found a rhythm. Hannibal looked like a Greek god, like something that had once been marble, brought to life by a single breath from his creator. All that existed in the room was the sound of their breathing and skin against skin; occasionally Will would adjust his legs or back, or drop his hands to the bed, grasping at the smooth sheets, and at one point he grasped aimlessly behind his head to find a pillow so that he could watch the other man easier. Will wanted to touch every inch of the politician’s body as he watched Hannibal riding him, lips parted and eyes half closed, but focused on him. There was also the absolute disbelief he was fucking the most powerful man in the country, watching as Hannibal’s body gracefully moved to match Will’s thrusts. There wasn’t anything fake or put upon—
“Would you prefer to be on top, Will? Or is this a suitable position for you?”

The question was delivered in the most clinical tone Will had ever heard in his life and it made his mind run through various scenarios (fantasies?), weighing each one in turn for its likelihood for pleasure and what would be most comfortable. Yes, being on top and feeling someone beneath him was something he missed and if he could have it, he would.

Will didn’t answer with words, choosing to carefully switch their positions with calculated manoeuvring and sank back completely into Hannibal, shuddering at the closeness and sudden superiority of being between the legs of the President of the United States. With some afterthought, he added tentative kisses along the man’s shoulder and neck as he began thrusting. Hannibal’s legs came to wrap around Will’s waist, arms around his neck, a comfortable position of an eager lover wishing for nothing more than to be vessel he spilt his seed into. The look on Hannibal’s face could only be described as content, the hints of a smile on lips that were parted. Sultry and kiss-swollen lips, ones that were now murmuring, “Anything,” so sweetly Will felt as though he was imagining it. Hannibal tilted his head back, baring his throat; it was not an act of submission or surrender, but an offering that Will wanted. He brought his face down to nuzzle along the skin, to breathe in the sweat and lick over the taut muscle.

Hannibal arched his back and moaned loudly, elegant; Will thought that as a man beautiful enough to demand his pleasure from his partners, he’d have at least demanded or ordered Will how to fuck him properly, but instead he seemed agreeable to anything Will wanted. It wasn’t enduring or tolerating Will, something he’d become accustomed to in other partners; no, Hannibal was enjoying that Will was here in the bed—essentially placing the responsibility for his satisfaction in Will’s hands. It wasn’t a surrender of power at all—they were equals in this bed.

Will’s eyes roamed to the right and a file folder beside the lamp on the nightstand; it was slightly askew and instinct told him to straighten it, so he reached out and brushed his fingertips against it to knock it in the proper position. It was one of the Chesapeake Ripper files and as he gave a satisfied gasp, returning his full focus to the man beneath him. Will imagined Hannibal’s chest split open and spilling flowers on the mattress below. He wanted to kiss all of Hannibal's ribs and his lungs and his kidneys and the soft adrenal glands. And he wanted Hannibal to do the same to him.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, embracing the image his mind had created.

Hannibal pulled him down for another kiss and Will blinked in shock, feeling a sudden guilt, feeling as though he’d lied; this was why he hated what his empathy did—too much of what he saw flooded into his mind. Hannibal’s legs tightened around his waist faintly, a wordless plea for more and Will braced his arms differently on the mattress, trying to gain purchase to give him what he wanted.

“William,” he breathed, his fingers twisted in Will’s hair. Will claimed his mouth again and when he pulled back, Hannibal’s voice was desperate. “William.”

Will felt Hannibal’s hips lift and jerk slightly, a hot pulse between their stomachs indicating that he’d came and Will’s thrusts became less controlled, wanting to feel nothing but the clench of Hannibal around him. Hannibal continued rolling his hips, planting kisses on Will’s mouth and jaw until Will couldn’t hold back any longer and came loudly, gasping.

He remained in that position for a minute as he panted against Hannibal’s neck and then pulled away, knowing he was probably an uncomfortable body to have on top of someone. Hannibal unfolded his legs from Will’s waist so that they could part and Will fell off to the side of the bed. He was still too mentally wrapped up in what he’d thought about before he’d come and he ducked his head against the other man’s shoulder as he caught his breath, not wishing to make eye contact. Hannibal made a content noise and stretched out his limbs before running a hand down the side of
Will’s face, brushing sweat-stuck curls off his temple and brushed his lips against his forehead.

Will didn’t want to talk and grimaced at the thought of what Hannibal might say, but after a few minutes of silence, it seemed that Hannibal was satisfied to simply lie there with them. Will’s breathing finally leveled and he found his fingers entwined with Hannibal’s.

“We shall have a late breakfast,” the other man announced to break the calm of the room.

“I…” Will wasn’t sure were the boundaries were anymore, but he did think it might be a nice gesture if he tried to make himself useful after sex. “I can start it while you go shower.”

Hannibal looked him over and Will had the distinct impression that Hannibal found it amusing that Will was going to cook for him, but before Will could become completely offended, he leaned in and kissed Will deeply.

“Then I shall join you in the kitchen in a few minutes, Will.”

Hannibal stood from the bed and went to the closet, retrieving the blue silk robe he wore and a second one that a muted charcoal. The second robe was set down on the end of the bed and Hannibal smiled at him mischievously before walking out of the bedroom to the bathroom. Will sighed, rubbing at his eyes. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

Bound by his offer, Will crawled out of bed, noting certain muscles that were sore and slipped on the robe, tying the sash tightly at his waist. Walking the long way around—through the former dressing room, past the bathroom, and through the West Sitting Hall—he avoided seeing any of the Secret Service agents that no doubt had all been apprised of his change in relationship to the President. What that official title was, he had no clue.

In the kitchen, he noted that he was starving and rummaged through the fridge to find decent supplies to make scrambled eggs and toast; it wouldn’t be fancy, but it would be filling and he didn’t doubt that Hannibal could at least appreciate that. He was only five minutes into his task when Hannibal appeared, wrapped in his robe and hair damp, though side parted.

Will held his breath as the other man’s hand lingered on his waist, eyes fluttering closed as Hannibal leaned in to press his lips to the corner of Will’s mouth, humming in amusement. Will himself let out a breathy laugh, startled that this was happening to him and that he wasn’t dreaming. Hannibal’s hand gripped his side a little tighter, pulling him a bit closer, and eyes still closed, Will turned his head to have a proper kiss; hungry for Hannibal, desperate to get as much as he could while Hannibal still wanted him. Hannibal allowed him to take the lead, leaning in closer and when he finally pulled away, he could sense Hannibal wanted to say something important, so Will opened his eyes and waited.

“You’re going to burn the sausage,” Hannibal murmured, a small smile on his lips as though he knew what Will actually wanted him to say.

“You’re distracting me,” Will pointed out, returning his focus to the food he was cooking.

“Why don’t you go wash and I’ll finish what you’ve started?” Hannibal’s lips brushed against Will’s ear.

Will parted only after taking another kiss; no, he’d give anything for this not to end.

*****

Naturally, Jack was not happy with the developments between Hannibal and his assistant, having
been notified upon reaching the White House that morning by the head of the Secret Service. It was insulting to him to have his personal life so carefully monitored and controlled by strangers and subordinates, but he had no choice in the matter now and so long as the most treasured facets of his life didn’t come to their attention, he determined it was a small price to pay.

After sending Will on a pointless errand to get him out of the White House, Hannibal found his way to Jack’s office. Jack had poured himself a whiskey and was acting cantankerous; it was Hannibal’s favourite way to have him, after miserable. As expected, there were no formalities from the other man, who didn’t bother to greet him with a ‘good morning’ or even offer him a drink as well. Hannibal stood patiently for the outburst to be expected from his Chief of Staff, watching him pace along the windows as he drank.

“Listen, Hannibal. You know I don’t care if you’re gay or not, but maybe Will isn’t the best choice to get close to.”

Unable to help himself, Hannibal feigned innocence. “Why not?”

Jack’s scowl was a rich merlot, improving over the years the more Hannibal saw of it. “He’s not stable. He’s not First Lady material.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. “I already have a First Lady, Jack.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I want Will.” That much was the truth.

Jack tried a new tactic, his jaw tight. “He can’t remain your personal aide if he’s going to be involved with you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not suppose to be fucking the help,” Jack snapped.

Hannibal bristled at the words, annoyed with the other man’s lack of composure and at the way their relationship was being thought of. Hannibal had no need or desire to seduce some hapless, impressionable employee, and Will was neither in the first place.

“I must insist that Will remain by my side,” Hannibal said coolly.

Jack downed the last of the whiskey and flinched slightly at the burn. “You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.”

Hannibal knew when he was victorious and as he straightened the cuff of his jacket, he gave a smile so shamelessly patronising that Bedelia would be jealous. “Jack, you’ve known me long enough to know that’s not exactly true.”

*****

A man was shown into Will’s office by an usher late one morning before the Fourth of July, while the President was in a private conference in the War Room and Will sized him up, quickly putting on his glasses. He looked grim and was carrying something that looked like one of the secured document carriers that often made their way to the President’s desk, most often delivered by Secret Service agents or his intelligence officers.

“Mr Will Graham?” the man asked, his voice slightly congested sounding.
“Yes. Who are you?”

The man pulled out a badge and flashed it quickly. “Agent Bryce Sandé, CIA.”

Will frowned. “Were we scheduled for a meeting, because I don’t have you on my roster for the day.”

“I’m delivering a classified document.” He offered over a black metal folder with a lock over the flap.

Will accepted the secured document, pulling out his memo pad to write down the details meant for the President. “What’s it?”

“The President requested it for you.” Will jerked his head back up. It was for him? Sandé tapped his fingers against his thigh. “You have twenty-four hours to read it and then your top secret clearance expires. No copying, no sharing, keep it in this case when you’re not reading it. Here’s the key.”

Will took the key and held it in his sweaty palm. “I understand. What case is it for?”

“Case?”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Chesapeake Ripper?”

The man shook his head slowly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh.” Will realised belatedly that he should have assumed the President wouldn’t inform outsiders of their research.

“I’ll return tomorrow at ten to retrieve it.”

Will nodded and the agent left.

Curious of the document, he locked the door to his office and taking the small key, unlocked the small lock on the front of the case. He slid out the folder and paused at the date marking the information tab. 1973. He frowned—that was far too old to be a Ripper case and when he opened it he realised he’d made a mistake in his assumption—this was about Hannibal.

A postcard size photo had been paper clipped to the top of a stapled report, stamped on the back with bold red letters ‘COPY’. Hannibal Lecter the Eighth, roots deep within his father’s homeland. Just a boy. One with a swollen left eye and a large angry looking bruise across his forehead where he’d been struck. Eyes that refused to look at the camera. Hair that was oily and clumped where the blood had stuck to it. Small lips, sallow skin. Will’s thumb touched the first hint of sharp cheekbones, prominent from starvation.

But this was not the photo of a victim. This was the Hannibal he’d seen a thousand times—biding his time and holding his tongue as he kept his thoughts to himself. There was nothing broken in the expression to Will’s eyes, This was the face of the future president of the United States.

Will tucked the photo back and continued onto the rest of the documents. He read everything in a scatter—medical reports here, witness accounts there, photos of bodies frozen from the terrible oncoming winter. Hannibal’s parents had been stationed in Paris, living in an embassy house meant to represent various countries behind the Iron Curtain; when not there, they traveled to the locales they were attempting to liberate for communism, a remnant of the massive plan President Kennedy had wanted accomplished. The two Lecter children had never been included in their work, but a
return to the Lecter motherland, an exception had been made.

In his mind’s eye, he could picture the President’s family: two elegant parents, two beautiful children holding hands. As his eyes looked over the top report, he absorbed the information the way dry ground took in the rain. It was necessary. The original words had been typed on an old typewriter, now a photocopy with slightly faded ink. Will was aware of the President’s sister, Mischa, but as an afterthought. His past was strictly off limits for discussion when he did interviews and there had been multiple times when Will had snipped and sniped at anyone who dare break the rule, and for the most part, the topic was largely forgotten by the American public or left as a tragic footnote mentioned in descriptions of who he was; Will had thought it tasteless to exploit the misfortune and had carefully kept the campaign steered away from that angle.

The Soviet presence in Lithuania had be despised, but it had been strong and the Lecters had passionately tried to rally support amongst the citizen to overthrow the communist presence. During this time, the embassy was taken hold by soldiers siding with the USSR, holding the Lecters hostage as Lithuanians began to rebel against communism. The Ambassador was killed along with his wife and then the soldiers kept Hannibal and Mischa as bargaining chips; while American military was sent immediately to recover the children, a nasty blizzard set in, halting any rescue attempts and causing the food supplies to dwindle quickly. The hostage crisis lasted fifteen days total and in the end, the Navy stormed the embassy and killed the soldiers before rescuing Hannibal.

But to read it, to see the proof that it had actually happened, every secret and guarded detail…Will’s need to understand and see was the driving force that made him venture further into the file. There was a medical report titled ‘LECTER, HANNIBAL’ and his eyes found the injuries to match what he’d seen in the photo. The Americans had requested proof of life and the soldiers had cut off Hannibal’s fingers to give to them, still warm. Will had never been able to look at anything from a clinical stance—everything was always shaded with the ghastly emotions that stole his identity and this was no different. Continuing to the medical report for Hannibal, he fought to control his breathing and empty his mind as he read about little hands that had suffered the amputations of pinky fingers, that had been stepped on by boots, broken fingers that were bruised but never took infection due to the cold temperatures in the building. A head that had been struck by something blunt—most likely brass knuckles the soviet soldier had been wearing—and a concussion. Will moved back to the typed account Hannibal had given to the Navy upon his rescue.

They’d been held captive in a room on their own, two young children without heat, food, or water, an explanation he’d been able to start a fire and melt snow for them to drink. They’d ate parts of books and candy he’d kept in his pocket, wrapped up in the large curtains he’d torn down. Will’s fingers tightened in anxious anticipation—he could feel that the report was only going to get more upsetting the further he read, but now he had to know it all, had to feel every frostbitten edge of this missing part of the other man’s past. He’d watched his parents being shot when the soldiers had rounded everyone into the embassy’s large reception entrance, shielded his sister as the other employees were executed as well. An apology for ruining the furniture in the room they’d been prisoner in, his father’s bank account would have the funds to pay for everything he’d burned or broken. He’d spoken over a landline to identify himself—had they heard? After that, he’d been returned to the room. Yes, he’d been aware that the men who’d taken them hostage were communist sympathisers and could the soldier please take him to Mischa now?

His eyes stung and he put the written transcript aside to look at further analysis of what had happened. Pages and pages of sadness, despair, and facts built a tableau of death and misery within his mind and then he reached the last page few pages titled ‘Lecter, Mischa: Cause of Death’; Will expected to find heartbreak and braced himself for any horrific manhandling of the two year old, but what he found instead left him shaken to the core. At first, Mischa had been listed as missing but a few hours into the sweeping of the embassy property, a gruesome discovery had been made. There
wasn’t anything left of the little girl—Will had to run to the bathroom outside his office to retch into the toilet—save for her lower jaw, various bone fragments, and a few stray hairs that hadn’t made it into the fireplace as kindling. She’d been killed, cooked, and burned. They’d eaten her.

Hannibal had believed she’d been traded in return for supplies and when they’d told him that she was dead, he’d stopped talking, become unresponsive.

People called him ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’.

He doubled over in his seat, eyes squeezed shut and throat burning. He couldn’t tell if he wanted to throw up or scream. Hannibal’s sister had been eaten and people liked that his name rhymed with that monstrous act and had chanted it during his campaign because it was so fucking funny to call a man a cannibal.

Of course, forty years ago, no one had told him that his sister had been eaten, but Hannibal was an intelligent man, there was no way he couldn’t know this detail by now; this information wouldn’t be shared with him if he didn’t already know—Will crossed his arms across himself, gripping at his upper arms tightly as he hunched over again. Hannibal had had his family stripped away from him and Will had so selfishly wanted to put himself into that space, to belong with him. Broken, useless Will, who wanted to be kissed in the morning, forcing himself into a space that didn’t fit his shape. Will, who had taken friendship offered and turned it into lust. Will, who wanted to be family so badly that he stunk of desperation to the point that Hannibal let him pretend that he could offer a second parent to Abigail’s life, pitying him. Pitying him. No. Hannibal didn’t pity people, despite his concern for the plight of others. Pity wasn’t natural or dignified for him. His head was spinning the same way it did when he’d been sick last summer and he shut the file closed, hands shaking as he returned it into the secured document case, shoving the key in his trousers pocket.

Will was unable to return to work for the rest of the day and finally had to go home to Wolf Trap. He sent a brief message to the President and arranged for someone to take his place as assistant should the President leave his meeting early. He carefully avoided Jack, whom he’d had three shouting matches with over Hannibal over the past three days; he didn’t need any crap for being ‘emotional’.

The file was left behind in his office, locked at the back of his desk’s bottom drawer.

*****

There was a knock on the door and Will stumbled down the stairs; it was eleven at night and he had been in the bathroom, scrubbing at his face, trying to wash away the screams he had awoken to. Not that he’d really been sleeping in the first place—his mind had been too thick with thoughts of small teeth being collected into glassine envelopes to be flown back to America, handing them to a silent little boy with bloody hands and Will had nothing to bandage them with. He would have drank himself to sleep, but he had no alcohol, save for the nice bottle of wine the Lecters had brought for him and he couldn’t bring himself to finishing it off. He pulled the door open and to his surprise, Hannibal stood on his front porch.

“What are you doing here?” Will asked weakly.

“I came to see if you were all right. May I come in?”

Will stood aside to let him in quickly, conscious of the need to keep him from being seen by anyone who’d possibly followed his Secret Service vehicle there.

“Leave him alone,” he chastised the dogs milling around.
Hannibal didn’t seem to notice the strays or the agents that have come inside the house. “How are you feeling?”

Will hated that the other man’s doctor’s tone was so coaxing of his honesty. “I…haven’t been able to stay asleep.”

Hannibal nodded, looking Will’s face over as though he could spot the problem. “You are experiencing nightmares.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Very vivid ones.”

“Let us go into the kitchen.”

Will followed after him and stood in the centre of room, bare feet on the linoleum. “Every time I close my eyes I see it. It’s just twisted and distorted. Like an out-of-body experience.”

“Shhh.” Hannibal maneuvered him to sit in one of the chairs at the table, hand brushing the nape of his neck. He left Will for a moment, then returned to his side with a small dish and a glass of water. On the dish were two small white tablets. “Would you like assistance? They aren't addictive.”

Sleeping pills.

“They’re what Abigail takes?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes, Will.”

“Okay.” Will wanted the relief badly and took them from the plate, swallowing them dry and leant his forehead against Hannibal’s stomach.

The President’s hand came back to rub soothingly at the back of Will’s head and he sighed; he was so tired, so emotionally drained. An agent entered the kitchen and began filling up a glass of water and instinctually he drew away; it didn’t matter if the President’s personal detail all knew that their relationship was not strictly professional—what he had with the other man was only for the dark, not for the eyes of others.

“You need to rest in your bed,” Hannibal suggested and he nodded, standing as the other man took a step back.

“Okay.”

His body was on autopilot as he walked back up the steps to his bedroom and he didn’t notice immediately that the other man was following him until he reached the top of the stairs.

“I shall stay with you,” Hannibal offered.

Will wanted that more than anything. “You don’t need to.”

“I do.” Hannibal stepped around him to enter the room.

Will locked the door behind him and tried to decide what he was meant to do. Hannibal shifted his posture, subtle enough but an invitation for Will to reach out if he so wished for it and so he did. Held in a gentle embrace, Will wondered if he should speak of what was bothering him. But what could be more tasteless that talking about a little girl who was dead. It didn’t matter if he was terrified of closing his eyes.

But as with everything, fear made him rude. “You watched her being led to her death.”
He pressed his face to Hannibal’s neck, wanting the brief contact before he was inevitably rejected.

“Is that what your empathy tells you?” Hannibal’s voice didn’t sound angry.

“Yes.” He kissed his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

Hannibal’s hands rubbed along his spine. “It hurts you?”

“I’m—I’m not trying to say that I can feel your pain the way you do.” Will wanted to sob, desperate to make it clear he wasn’t trying to appropriate the other man’s tragedy for his own.

“But you do.”

He considered that Hannibal had shown up with sleeping pills and glanced up at him, though careful not to make eye contact. “You knew I’d have a hard time.”

Hannibal’s voice was mournful. “I shouldn’t have given it to you without preparing you. This is my fault.”

“Don’t—don’t say that,” Will hissed, gripping onto the other man’s arms, willing himself not to break down. Hannibal shifted under his touch and Will immediately let him go to, finding his hand to show he hadn’t meant to scare him, to make him uncomfortable. “Why did you share it with me?”

Hannibal led him to the bed and Will found himself sitting on the edge as Hannibal murmured. “It seemed like the right time.”

“Why?”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment. “There shouldn’t be secrets between us.”

“I don’t want there to be secrets between us,” Will agreed softly.

There was a small pinch on the inside of his left arm and he started to look down to see if it was a mosquito or a spider biting him, but Hannibal caught his chin in his palm and brought his face back to look at him. Will felt drowsy and he could hear the steady and thunderous sound of blood rushing through his veins. He realised that the beat of his heart was actually not this, but something playing in the room.

“Music?” His tongue felt thick as he asked the question—it wasn’t a ‘why’, it was an ‘is this a hallucination’ question.

Something soft and gentle—lips—pressed against his forehead. “It will help you relax.”

Will shifted on the bed, his limbs feeling uncoordinated as he made room for the other man to lie down as well.

“May I guide your sleep?” Hannibal breathed in his ear.

Will tried to lift his head up, but it was too heavy. “What?”

Hannibal’s voice sounded distant, thunder on the horizon. The bed moved and the mattress dipped, Will clenching at the front of Hannibal’s shirt, certain he was adrift. This man was his anchor. The word whispered itself in his ear and Will nodded. Hannibal was his anchor. His anchor. He didn’t need a boyfriend—this was so much nicer. The storm laughed, a low rumble and the crescent of the moon tipped into a smile. His own laugh sounded like the breeze and he could see the curtains around the window blowing with the movement of air. The storm hummed and Will sighed,
allowing it to wrap him up in warmth. He found himself closing his eyes and listening to the steady rhythm of words falling around him.

****

Will awoke to Hannibal Lecter lying beside him on his bed. He blinked, staring at the face of the other man, who was looking back at him curiously. The room was warm and the sound of his phone alarm

Hannibal leaned over him, reaching out to the side table. His BlackBerry stopped ringing and Hannibal returned to his original position on the bed.

“You’re still here,” Will mumbled as Hannibal brushed his hair out of his eyes.

“Yes.”

Will frowned. “You didn't sleep here, did you?

Hannibal’s fingers continued touching Will’s face, his voice low. “For a few hours. I have already informed Jack that I shall be taking the day off, so when we return to the White House, we may spend the time together discussing what is troubling you.

“Can you take the day off?” he asked cautiously, looking just past the other man’s shoulder.

“I shall make it up on Sunday. I’ve informed them that I am not feeling well and need rest.”

“I…” he trailed off, trying to find a way to give the other man an out.

As though he knew what Will was trying to do, Hannibal murmured, “Please don’t trouble yourself, Will.”

“Does Abigail know you’re here?” Will wouldn’t want her to find her dad missing just because he couldn’t sleep.

Hannibal smiled slightly. “I’ve left a note.”

Will’s eyelids were heavy and after a moment he admitted. “I’m still tired.”

“Then we shall sleep.”

Will almost succumbed to the bed again, but the sound of small scratches on the locked bedroom door made his eyes open wide, realisation that the dogs hadn’t slept in his room with him that night. He had already forced himself out of the bed before he realise it and over his shoulder, said, “I need to feed the dogs first. Let them outside. I think I have a spare shirt and pants…” He gestured to his dresser before leaving the room.

Downstairs, he found his phone and quickly left a voice mail for Jessie-the-Dog-Walker not to come; the front door was unlocked—Secret Service orders, so that they could access his house without having to fumble with a lock—and he opened it wide to allow the dogs free run of the front yard. He rubbed his fingers against a small mark on the inside of his left arm—it looked like a puncture wound from a needle, but then he decided it must have been a mosquito from the night before. The sun had already tinged the sky pink and as he stared at the east, he looked at the various agents parked in the driveway, no doubt disgruntled over the orders that the President would be staying over longer, which further complicated their jobs. There was also the President’s evening detail in the kitchen, watching him from the doorway; the coffee pot was gurgling quietly and Will kept his eyes lowered
as he began to fill up the dogs’ bowls with food and new water, pretending he didn’t notice how the conversation had ceased in his presence.

It didn’t take a genius to know they thought that the President was looking to have a night over at his boyfriend’s—Will’s nose wrinkled in annoyance. Hannibal would never come over to his house just for a quick fuck. And they weren’t boyfriends. Or dating. As he whistled to the dogs from the front door, he thought about why the President was even in his house. A classified file with the full story of what had happened to him. Did that make them boyfriends? Sharing secrets? But then, Will was still his top political strategist and perhaps he felt it pertinent to any political strategies. Will scrubbed at his face. It was too early in the morning to be thinking about this shit.

He shut the front door, no longer acknowledged the Secret Service who were drinking up all the coffee in his house and climbed the stairs back to his bedroom only to find Hannibal sitting on the opposite side of the bed naked, his clothing folded and placed on the side table.

“Oh,” Will murmured, staring at the smooth shoulders and tracing down to the straight line of his spine.

“You don’t mind, do you, Will?” Hannibal asked and in the light of dawn, his eyes looked more red than brown.

“No.” Will came to his side of the bed and self consciously returned to where he’d been sleeping earlier.

Perhaps Hannibal preferred sleeping without clothes, but had lost that luxury by living in the White House.

“Such a big bed to be sleeping alone, Will,” Hannibal murmured as he pulled the sheet over them.

Will swallowed hard, unsure what to think as he came to lie beside the other man. The bed had cooled slightly and he turned on his side to face the President; he wanted to touch Hannibal’s body everywhere, wanted to leech whatever suffering his body held and take it for himself. Will was used to suffering. He knew its taste. Hannibal deserved none of it.

“I’m too tired…” Will admitted, keeping his hands to himself.

“I know.” The President chastely kissed his lips. “Let us sleep.”

*****

Perhaps to spite Jack, perhaps to keep Will from planting any seeds of doubt, Hannibal arranged for a gesture that was theatrical and calculatedly chosen to appeal to the other man’s personality. And Secret Service was amused at his request, because while it was an abuse of his power as President, it was something that a man newly in love would do, which was exactly the impression he needed to give.

One evening after dessert and Abigail had gone to bed, Hannibal invited Will on a walk with him; leading him down to the West Wing’s basement and its tunnel system, they were escorted by Secret Service to a offshoot that took them to the Ellipse behind the White House. This late, the massive park was abandoned by any tourist or visitor, which meant they were free to wander together, an array of agents surrounding them in a wide radius so that they could walk with the illusion of privacy.

Will made no small talk, and Hannibal steered them to walk closer to the tree line until they were walking amongst the well groomed poplars and maples. He watched Agent Katz ahead of him stop
and bring her wrist to her mouth to speak into her microphone; Will was distracted by the bark of the trees and Hannibal knew it was time, eyes locked on the other man to see how he’d react. The lights dropped and the entire park became pitch black as his eyes quickly adjusted.

“What the fuck…?” Will actually reached out as a defensive gesture, not wanting Hannibal to go any further as he tried to assess the danger of the situation.

Hannibal was amused that Will’s desire to protect always overwhelmed any logic he had. “Do not worry, Will. It is something that was already planned for.” He pointed to the White House. “Look.”

“It…” Will’s eyes became larger in the dark. A ship out on the water. “Did you do this for me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To impress you.”

Will shared at him as though he thought the statement was the stupidest thing he’d ever heard in his life. “Hannibal, everything about you already impresses me. I don’t think…”

“Will.” Hannibal took a step forward.

It was a gamble that there might be paparazzi lurking somewhere by chance to catch them in this decidedly intimate way, but anything good was worth a risk.

Will frowned. “You’re…”

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone before,” Hannibal admitted, no half truths.

Will’s eyes widened and his swallow was audible. “Are you asking me to be your boyfriend?”

Hannibal didn’t care what they called one another. “Partner, suitor, paramour.”

“Your swain.” Will smirked.

“Do you see me as a knight, dear Will?” A smile tugged at his lips.

“It is the New Camelot.”

But the time for joking was at an end and Hannibal demanded eye contact. “Do you wish to be mine, Will?”

“Do you wish to be mine, Hannibal?” Will quickly retorted, his voice too serious to be mocking for once.

Anyone else and he would break their neck, but Hannibal craved the fire in Will’s voice, a determination to be claimed only by someone worthy of his intellect and potential, whether he realised it or not.

“If you do not want this, you must say so now.” Hannibal took another step forward, now in the other man’s personal space. “While you still have time.”

“Are you threatening me?” Will asked, his eyes narrowing and drawing himself up taller.

Hannibal’s heart leapt. “Yes.”
“Then it’s only fair I threaten you back.” Will looked terrified for a moment, as though he had some sort of horrible, terminal illness that he was afraid he might transmit by accepting anything formal. “Hannibal, I am broken, I am rude, I am borderline insane.”

Hannibal’s hands took him by the face gently and then murmured against his lips, “And I would have you no other way.”

“My mind never turns off.”

“I wouldn’t want it to,” he assured.

Will’s eyes took a serious edge, begging Hannibal to not want him. “I will hurt you.”

“May you be the only man to ever wound me.”

“Mr President,” Katz voice called out, alerting him that the lights would be returning in two minutes.

“I understand, Agent Katz.”

Hannibal placed one last kiss on Will’s lips then created space between them, leaving Will to ask, “So that’s it? We’re dating?”

Hannibal reached out to straighten Will’s tie. “‘Possessing’ is the term I’d use.”

“Does that mean I don’t have to fill out paperwork for an interoffice relationship?” Will asked drily.

“The rules are different for the president.”

And it was true—who would dare tell Hannibal Lecter what to do?

Will’s brows furrowed once more. “Hannibal.”

“This is between you and I. I will not involve politics.”

Will looked ready to roll his eyes, but his tone was light and a smile played on his lips. “Says the President of the United States.”
“Yeah, well, his pussy game’s weak, anyway,” Marissa said to Abigail in the dining room as they set the table together.

Hannibal physically cringed at the words leaving Marissa’s mouth as he plated their dinner in the kitchen; an anger boiled within him as it triggered memories of yelled words at Lady Murasaki. Turning towards the dining room, he made his decision. He’d had enough—tonight he would put an end to her presence in his life and in Abigail’s. It took four more hours before the opportunity presented itself; Abigail remained in her bedroom as Marissa left the Residence, no doubt smelling of alcohol that she didn’t want him to know about. He was irritated that she was drinking with Marissa again, but the problem would be remedied tonight so he had no intention of punishing her for it. Marissa’s backpack was slung over her shoulder and she was muttering to herself as she dug through her handbag for her car keys.

Hannibal stepped out of the shadows of the living room, holding a saucer and a glass of water. “Miss Schurr.”

She took a step back, an unconscious gesture. “Hey, Dr Lecter. Didn’t realise you were still up.”

“You have a long drive home tonight because of roadwork. These will help you sober up and keep your wits about you.” He offered out the saucer to reveal three small white tablets. “I know you and Abigail have been drinking the beer that you brought along with you.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“I’m sure you won’t do it again.”

“No, sir. Not at all.” She placed them in her mouth and accepted the glass of water, swallowing them down. “Thanks.”

“My duty as a father.” He nodded politely, taking the glass of water back. “Drive safely, Miss Schurr.”

She smiled at him, none the wiser. “Night, Dr Lecter.”

“Goodnight.”

Hannibal watched her get into the elevator and then carried the saucer and glass to the kitchen, where he washed, dried, and put them away; he set the glass to the side slightly so that he could give it to Abigail in the morning when he served her breakfast. After leaving the kitchen, he went to the living room, seating himself at the tying station his daughter shared with Will. Their latest lure used bright orange and black striped feathers; locating that bit of Marissa that Abigail had been storing—a cut lock of hair tucked in a small plastic bag, hidden beneath other supplies she kept in the plastic tackle box Will had gifted to her. With careful hands, he added the lock of hair to the fly she had been working on with Will; glancing over the shape of the lure, he decided to add a bright orange striped feather as well, transforming the fly into a flashy beta fish. Abigail was never going to use it in water—it would be excellent displayed. They were family now and while he’d done the work tonight, this kill belonged to them all. It was a perfect beginning, getting rid of a point of friction and turning it into a trophy.

This was for Abigail. He twisted the bright orange string around the feather and hair.
This was for Will. He knotted the twine, securing it to the lure.

This was for him. He cut the string close to the knot with the small scissors that made a crisp noise when the blades slid against one another.

Brushing the feather and hair under his fingertip, he smiled, absolutely satisfied with his work. For what was art without love?

*****

Knocking on her bedroom door awoke Abigail at exactly 5:14 am, earlier than her set alarm. She called out muffled permission to enter to whomever was on the other side, and pushed herself up when Barney’s large frame blocked out the doorway.

“Good morning.” She frowned, her voice thick and drowsy. “Everything okay?”

Her agent flipped on the light switch and she squeezed her eyes shut at the onslaught of bright light. “Your dad’s going to want to talk to you in a moment.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her tired mind still trying to process what could have possibly happened that her agent needed to be here in her bedroom.

“Do you want me to stay here with you?” Barney’s expression was grave.

She blinked at him and while she considered what was being asked, her father appeared in the doorway next, dressed in a suit, hair brushed and parted, ready for the day.

“Abigail, something terrible has happened,” he said as he stepped into the bedroom.


“It’s about Marissa.”

The name became lodged in her throat and time seemed to come to a standstill. “Marissa?”

Her father’s eyes lowered momentarily. “Last night when she was driving home, she was involved in a car accident.”

“What?” her voice sounded a few octaves higher than usual and her heart was racing.

“She hit a pylon in a construction zone.”

She could hear her voice breaking. “Is she—“

Her father nodded once solemnly. “She is dead.”

Abigail let out a scream into her pillow, sobbing as she felt a physical absence within her.

“Barney, Abigail shall be staying home today. I shall contact you later,” her father instructed.

“Yes, President Lecter.” Abigail felt him grip a large hand onto her shaking shoulder. “If you need anything, please let me know. Okay?”

She let out another anguished cry, almost drowning out her father dismissing her agent.

“Thank you.”
The door to her bedroom shut and her father came to stand closer to the bed. “Abigail, shall I leave you alone or—“

She had never felt so much pain, the walls of her memory palace dissolving and howling around the supine form of her friend. Marissa was smiling up at her, her eyes blank and clouded over.

“Abigail, it would be healthy for you to grieve. You should cry as much as you need to.”

She reached out a hand for him, blinded by her tears. “Please don’t leave me alone.”

“You are never alone. You have Mischa.” His hand gently removed hers from his wrist. “Come out for breakfast when you’re ready.”

He turned out the lights and she fell back on the bed, clutching at her pillow as she let the loss of her best friend consume her.

*****

Abigail was sitting on her bed, hands clutching a kleenex; it was past breakfast and the Washington PD was there with two detectives to talk to her about Marissa’s state before she left the White House last night. Her father was there in the bedroom, standing by the door quietly, ready to make them leave in the event she wasn’t emotional able to handle the questioning. They’d already asked about the beer bottles found in Marissa’s oversized purse and she denied any knowledge of them; she’d only had one and had wiped her fingerprints off of it before handing it over to her friend, who was graciously going to sneak them out of the White House. She wasn’t trying to hide it from her father —she knew he was aware of her social drinking—it was simply a reflex at this point. The detectives’ next statement caught her by surprise, however.

“We found sleeping pills in her system.”

“Sleeping…pills?” At first she thought she hadn’t heard them right, but then her eyes looked past them and to her father, feeling a sinking in her stomach. He looked at her impassively and she knew. He did this. He’d killed Marissa.

“Abigail, do you know where Marissa might have gotten the sleeping pills?” the detective to her left asked, her voice compassionate.

Abigail was a Lecter and lies came to her as naturally as breathing. “Um, she said there’s a kid at school that sells different pills to everyone. I don’t know who—you’d have to ask around.”

“Why do you think she would take sleeping pills before driving?”

“Because she’s fucking stupid!” Abigail burst into tears, a sudden and violent anger filling her. “She was always doing stupid shit like that! If you check her medical history, you’ll see this was something she did regularly. She overdosed on pain pills once at a party; her parents made a big deal about covering it up. This isn’t anything new for her.”

“Did she take them while she was here—“

“I would never let her drive if I’d known she had taken something.” She closed her eyes, forcing herself to lie to cover for her father. “She probably got bored during traffic and did it.” A knot formed in her throat, painful and making it impossible to talk. “Can we please do this later?”

Years of being the nation’s favourite child victim made it easy for her to demand sympathy and the detectives looked at her with such cloying pity she could kill them. The detectives excused
themselves from the bedroom, assuring her that she could call them when she felt ready to talk again, and left her alone with her father. He watched her impassively and she glared at him as her eyes watered, daring him to speak. His gaze ate at her expression hungrily and she felt nauseous at the obvious amusement, at his lack of remorse. Killing was to cull, killing was to feel like a god, killing was not for belittling one another.

“Abigail—“

“Get out.” Her voice was shaking and she was fighting every desire to lash out at him. “Please.”

“I would like to talk—“

“There is nothing to talk about!” she screamed at him. “Get out!”

They stared at one another and while she was trembling and crying again, she knew that she was just as formidable as him. He finally lowered his eyes and gave a nod as though he was surrendering, even though she knew he wasn’t. He left the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. She let out an anguished scream, her hands gripping at her head and she remembered how not long ago her friend had been passed out on her bedroom’s floor, half naked and just for her. Yanking her clothing out of her closet, finding small satisfactions in the sound of seams tearing, she scattered them across the bedroom floor and threw herself back on the bed to scream into her pillow at the betrayal she felt. *How could he?*

*****

Her cellphone was pressed to her ear, desperate to hear the voicemail message again.

“Hey, you stupid bitch! I am at the best party of my life and—“ Marissa’s attention changed to someone trying to talk to her, “Piss off! I’m on the fucking phone, you moron!” Her voice became friendly again. “—And I want you here!” She let out a wild, delighted laugh. “Abbs, we are fucking burning hundred dollar bills right now! Call me and I’ll pick you up!”

Her heart hurt in her chest, a pulsing bruise that ached, and her cheeks were wet and soft from tears. Abigail pressed the pound sign on her phone and the message replayed. “Hey, you stupid bitch! I am at the best party…”

*****

There was a tentative knock on her door and she bristled momentarily at the sound, dreading her father, dreading *fucking* Georgia. But the voice that she heard shyly calling for her was instantly stabilising and so she didn’t protest when the door opened. Will entered quietly and thankfully left the lights off.

“Hey, I, uh...I thought...it’s my lunch break.” He sat down on the bed behind her and she fought back a growl. It was a relief that he didn’t try to touch her—she didn’t think she could handle that right now. He seemed to interpret her silence and stillness as permission to talk. “Um, when my...when my dad died I was pretty broken about it.” He sighed heavily. “I found it really hard to lose someone I cared about; he knew me better than most people. Um, I still remember the day I got the phone call telling me he was in the hospital and wouldn’t make it through the night.”

She wanted to scream *‘I don’t give a shit about your worthless drunk of a father! He’s nothing! He was weak!’* But she kept her mouth closed and endured.

“I…” He was quiet and she could tell from the sound of his breathing that he was probably starting to cry. Her fingers knotted into her pillow in annoyance. “I just want you to know that you aren’t
alone right now.”

She remained quiet, unsure if she was angry at him for being in her space or relieved that at least there was someone she needed who wasn’t trying to hurt her.

“Where’s your clothes hamper?” he asked after a few more minutes of her silence.

She pointed to the bathroom and heard Will picking up the clothing she’d thrown about the room, hearing his sad sighs at the torn blouses and crumpled silks. She smiled into the pillow despite her exhaustion. She liked special attention. While she’d planned for her father to find her clothing like this, having Will to pick it up and take care of it seemed like a greater triumph. She wanted his love, too, and in this moment, he was catering to her needs and not her father’s.

When he finally returned to her bedside, he sat back down and was nothing more than a quiet presence. She wondered what he saw of her pain, if her as truly capable of empathically suffering as greatly as she was.

“You gonna be okay, mon couer?” he finally asked, his voice a tender whisper, and she heard his soft drawl tainting his words like a former life.

Something in her shattered and she croaked out, “Yeah.”

It really wasn’t and she wanted to tell him the truth, but she knew that wasn’t an option, that it would probably be a secret between herself and her father until the end of time. There was hesitation and then she felt him lean forward, pressing a kiss to her head.

“Let papa know if he can do anything for you,” he murmured against her hair and she closed her eyes.

Was that what he thought of himself in his mind? She would have liked to have called him that when she was younger. She nodded her head again and he left quietly, taking his Louisianan accent and sad memories with him. Another round of tears escaped her eyes and she wept into her pillow.

*****

When Will returned to his office, the President was sitting in the arm chair closest to the door. He glanced up from the papers he’d been reviewing.

“How is she?” he asked quietly.

Will shut the office door behind him. “Devastated. Were she and Marissa...”

”Lovers? No. But Abigail has only ever had her, so it is natural that she’d be feeling the loss like the death of a lover.” Hannibal lowered the papers to his lap. “You are feeling her pain, Will.”

“Hard not to,” he murmured.

“You mustn’t.”

“She’s sad.” Will shook his head, wishing that he didn’t feel the loss so deeply. He hadn’t even met the girl.

“Loss is a natural part of life. Marissa was not the first, nor shall she be the last.”

“I don’t want this to be added stress to what happened to her back in April. I don’t want her to feel overwhelmed.”
Hannibal stood from the chair and held out a hand to him; Will accepted it and was carefully pulled into an embrace. Unlike previous times, he found his arms pinned to his sides and was unable to move unless he physically pushed Hannibal away, which he’d never be able to do. Unsure why he was being held so close, he fought down the instinct to retreat and instead waited patiently to see what Hannibal wanted of him.

“Please,” Hannibal murmured into his ear.

There was so much trust in Hannibal’s voice that Will almost sobbed. Getting to share the President’s mind space always came with such relief and he gratefully surrendered himself to that calm and confident place.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured as he allowed his mind to become overwhelmed.

“Do not apologise for your compassion.” Hannibal pressed his lips to Will’s skin.

*****

One of the perks of being in a relationship with the President was the fact that he was no longer subject to the constant security clearances; he could simply go anywhere he needed to (bar any classified events) and Secret Service just waved him in. He’d already left early for the night, but when he’d received a text from Hannibal’s phone stating, {Please return. Must talk}, he’d left Wolf Trap quickly. Once in the Residence, he listened to heated voices arguing in the kitchen and he hurried in, hoping nothing drastic had occurred.

Hannibal paused a beat upon seeing him. “Hello, Will.”

“I received a message you needed to see me urgently,” Will said, wondering if he was misreading the confusion on the President’s face.

Hannibal turned to look at the young woman leaning against the wall. “Abigail?”

“I wanted to stay at Will’s tonight,” she said tightly.

“Oh, Abigail…” Will sighed, wishing he’d not been caught up in whatever dispute was going on between Hannibal

Hannibal nodded. “I understand you don’t want to stay here tonight. If Will wants to accommodate you for the night, I have no objections.”

“I…how would that look?” he said, very unsure if he was the best source of support for her.

Abigail looked devastated. “I thought you wanted to be family.”

“I do!” he insisted, suddenly scared that this might be stripped away from him. “I…I’ll need to clear out the guest room.”

She removed what could only be Hannibal’s phone and set it on the kitchen counter. “I’ll go pack.”

After she left the room, Hannibal turned him. “I appreciate this, Will.”

“This is about Marissa?” Will asked, hoping that this wasn’t something complicated by what had happened to Boyle.

“Yes. I’ve not been…as sympathetic as she’s needed.”
“It’s okay.” Will wasn’t sure if he needed to touch Hannibal’s shoulder reassuringly, but decided in the end that an acceptable window for comforting had passed and kept his hand to himself. “She’s… sad. She’ll know you didn’t mean it.”

“Your consideration means the world to me, Will.” Hannibal leaned in and kissed him softly on the cheek, one hand coming to rest over Will’s. Will allowed his eyes to close, taking comfort in the other man’s presence before pulling back slowly.

“I’ll text you when we get there, okay? And I’ll let you know if anything happens,” he promised.

“I would appreciate that.”

Will tried to muster a confident smile, not wanting Hannibal to worry about Abigail. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Will.”

He found Abigail waiting by the elevator, two agents waiting downstairs in the parking lot; the men are hiding their displeasure at having to travel, no doubt expecting a night of easy work, but Will holds no sympathy for them. Abigail rode back to his house in the Secret Service SUV that had trailed him, sneaking in through the back kitchen door. She looked so tired, no doubt exhausted by the emotional toll her friend’s death had put her through. Her two agents enter the house as well, informing Will that they’ll be using his kitchen as headquarters for the night.

As they stand in the living room, Will not looking at either men, he tried to force himself to act as the father of Abigail would, which meant manners. “Uh, can I offer you…?”

“I’m just going to get some coffee.” The agent leaves for the kitchen, off to rummage through Will’s kitchen without permission.

He looked back at the other agent and waved a hand vaguely to the door beside the staircase. “Bathroom is over there.”

The man nodded, completely disinterested. “Thanks.”

He forced back a glare and motioned for Abigail to follow him upstairs. The guest room has never been used by company, existing simply for the sake of staying true to its original intention. When he opened the door, the air was slightly dusty and he hurried over to open the window.

“Um, here’s my guest room. Sorry it’s…”

There were two boat motors tucked in the corner of the room and the mattress was bare.

“It’s perfect. I…it’s great. Thank you.” She set her overnight bag down on the bed.

“If you need anything at all, please ask. Nothing’s too little, okay?” he assured her, though he had serious doubts that he was capable of being the father she needed at the moment.

“Can I have something to eat?”

He realised belatedly that he’d arrived when Hannibal had been preparing dinner. “Uh, sure. What do you want? I don’t have a lot to cook, but I can order pizza or take out.”

“Pizza,” she mumbled, looking out the window at the back field.

“Okay, what would you like on it?”
“Everything.”

“Okay. I’ll order it.” He thought for a moment. “Do you want anything else?”

“Water, please.”

“Sure. I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Yeah.” She turned around abruptly. “Can you see if they have cake?”

The question caught him by surprise, but a sweet tooth during hard times wasn’t unheard of. “What kind of cake?”

“Chocolate.”

After placing the order, he hurried back upstairs. “No cake, but I can run down to the gas station and get you, uh, a hostess cupcake or, uh, a Snoball.”

She shook her head. “No thanks.”

He rubbed his palm against the stubble on his chin. “I’ll let you settle in, then.”

*****

When the pizza arrived, Will sat with her on the floor of the guest bedroom eating straight from the pizza box. She wasn’t talking, just eating and he wondered if she was an emotional eater and he considered talking about it with Hannibal; it wasn’t healthy to eat emotions, smothering them with food. Twice he had to voice his concerns she was eating enough to make herself sick, but she waved off his remarks, devouring the pizza hungrily. He wasn’t sure if she wanted to talk about the fact her best had died or if she needed to think of anything else but Marissa Schurr. When they finally finished the pizza, she stretched her arms above her head, and asked,

“Can the dogs stay with me tonight?”

He nodded, collecting the pizza box and greasy paper napkins. “Yeah, let me bring their beds in.”

She left for his bathroom and as she showered, he brought the dog beds into the guest room, quietly instructing each of his strays that their guest needed extra attention. Then he put new sheets and blankets on the mattress, thankful that he had a clean set to dress the bed with. Feeling unsure, he walked about the room, straightening things and making sure her pillows were adequately fluffed, finally sitting down on the end of the bed to scratch at the dogs’ heads. When she returned to the guest room, her eyes red and hair wet, she came to sit next to him, looking at him with a carefully stoic face. Carefully, he took her hand in his,

“Abigail, if you want…” He sighed. “I don’t know what to say in a time like this. Just that I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

“Thanks.” Her hand squeezed his. “It means a lot.”

He longed to tell her how much he loved her, that it was unbearable for him to see her suffering, but instead he wished her a goodnight and left her.

*****

Hannibal was sitting in bed, reading the preliminary findings of Marissa Schurr’s death while drinking a fine scotch when his phone rang.
“Good evening, Jack.”

“Hannibal, why is Abigail staying the night at Will’s?”

Hannibal didn’t know how Jack knew this, but it wasn’t really something that mattered. “She’s upset with me. She is also mourning the loss of Marissa—“

“Okay, but how does it look to the nation that your underage daughter is spending the night at a staffer’s house?”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. “Why would they know?”

“Freddie Lounds. Get on Tattle-Politics, read the article, call me back.”

Jack hung up without saying anything more and Hannibal scowled briefly at Jack’s attempt at authoritarianism, but opened his iPad and quickly sought the tabloid’s homepage. The article is all speculation, there were no pictures, but there was enough information for Hannibal to know it was accurate enough. He should have considered Freddie would be stalking Abigail for the coming days and somewhere in the back of his mind he had considered it, but the sight of seeing Will trying to manage a mourning daughter had been very appealing.

Turning off the iPad, he determined it was time to get some rest, as there was no doubt in his mind that he’d have many things to discuss with his staff in the morning as a result of the trouble seeking Miss Lounds. He wasn’t interested in calling Jack back, anyway.

*****

Abigail knew that she couldn’t avoid her father forever, but she was grateful for the reprieve she’d had at Will’s house. However they have to leave before the sun has even risen to escape the paparazzi gathered around Will’s property; she hid in the back seat of the Secret Service’s blacked out SUV while Will rode separately in his station wagon as though it was a regular day off to work. They arrive to the White House without incident and she’s able to sneak back in undetected. She’s certain Jack and Mrs Madchen will have something to say about the matter, and she’d be forced to go through yet another conference about the appearance she had to maintain in order to keep her father’s name out of any scandal.

She made Will wait in the West Sitting Hall when she went into the kitchen where she knew her father was starting breakfast—she’d been able to smell the frying meat the moment she got off the elevator. Sure enough he was cooking her favourite breakfast, looking up at her as though this was any other morning.

“Good morning, Abigail.”

She turned her face from him, making her anger known. “I’ve not forgiven you.”

There was a softness in his voice that hinted he was pleased with her reaction. “Nor should you. Not right away. You’re mourning her.”

She snapped her head back to glare at him. “I loved her.”

For a moment, his eyes looked sad and he said gently, “Loving isn’t the same as knowing, Abigail.”

“She was mine!” she hissed sharply, just barely remembering to keep her voice quiet enough so that they wouldn’t be heard.
“She was a bad influence to you, beloved,” he stated and everything within her crumbled.

“No, she wasn’t,” she lied.

“Abigail.” He abandoned his post at the stove and came over to her, pulling her close and cradling her head against his shoulder, one strong arm across her back, and she felt the weakness in his heart for her. “My Mischa,” he murmured into her hair.

Her eyes immediately closed and she found her arms moving to tuck between their chests. “She was my friend.”

“I know.” His voice was so soft and soothing. “And I am sorry to take away that human connexion from you. I know you spent so much time cultivating that friendship: building trust, creating bonds, forging an identity with her. But was she shaping you for something better? With distance and maturity, was your friendship with her going to last? Marissa was a girl—you are almost transformed into a woman. You are the First Lady. You are a hunter. You are ready to take your rightful place in the world and she is concerned with trivial, childish things that you have long since surpassed.”

“She made me feel normal,” she whispered, burying her face further into his warm sweater.

She felt him exhale softly and he stroked the back of her skull. “Oh, my sweet child. You are not meant to be normal. I know it is easy to be tempted into joining them, but the children at your school are not your peers. They never have been. Marissa—while well intentioned and loyal—was not your equal, either.”

“It’s so lonely,” she murmured against his shoulder, wishing he would understand.

“Ours is a lonely existence. But we have Will in our lives now. Surely you won’t be as lonely?”

While she has no animosity towards Will, she can’t help but feel bitter that she doesn’t have the same type of closeness. “But he’s yours.”

“His desire to be your father is very strong. He has an instinct to be drawn to you, to me. He belongs to us and he will show us love and affection and the companionship we both so very much crave.”

“But I want a friend of my own.”

She can hear the smile in his voice, as though he found the matter silly. “Abigail, you are still young. You haven’t even left the nest yet. You have time.”

It wasn’t anything she could argue because this was his world and he was always right, even when he was wrong. Closing the matter, she instead gently chastised him, “You could have been kinder about her death.”

“You know I wouldn’t let her suffer.”

She was certain that that was a lie.

“I don’t want to know any of the details, okay? Promise me you won’t tell me anything. I want to remember her as she was.”

“Of course, my treasure.” He loosened his hold on her. “Now, let’s see if we can convince Will to join us for a late breakfast.”

*****
The funeral for Marissa Schurr a week later was tragic in the most amusing way. Mrs Schurr was furious at the sight of Abigail and came storming over, screaming accusations at Hannibal’s daughter for living while her daughter didn’t.

“You did this! You killed my daughter!”

Hannibal stepped in front of his child, offering himself as a physical barrier between her and Mrs Schurr, who collapsed against him, sobbing against his cashmere; he comforted her for a moment before allowing her sons to collect her.

Representative Schurr came over, dark circles under his eyes. “She doesn’t mean it. She’s just sad.”

Hannibal feigned sadness, touching the other man on the shoulder in a gesture of sympathy. “We understand.”

Abigail was sobbing quietly, face turned into Will’s shoulder; the other man was holding her close, eyes glazed over as he stroked her back. Hannibal came over and touched her head, leading the three of them to sit down in one of the pews; he imagined they made a beautiful sight as they consoled her. If they were alone in this church, he might have pulled them both closer to him so that he could investigate the possibility that Will’s empathy was creating a feedback loop in Abigail and that they both might need his grounding presence. But there are too many people in the church to allow that to be a possibility and he is forced to simply savour the moment for what it is.

A photo of Hannibal comforting Mrs Schurr was on the front of the Tattle-Politics homepage for the rest of the week.
Chapter Twenty-Three

The last two weeks of August were to be spend in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts at the Kennedy Compound, a massive settlement that included the three Kennedy houses as well as the various Kennedy properties that surrounded it. An immensely secure and private facility, Will found himself itching to vacation there. It was traditional for presidents and their families to use Camp David—the getaway located in northeastern Maryland’s Catoctin Mountains, a protected fortress that was located roughly 44 miles west of Vice President Du Maurier’s family property in Boring—but Kennedys took the concept of summering seriously and the only place acceptable to truly enjoy time with family was at the home base in Massachusetts, which Hannibal had insisted on.

It was a definite that Will was joining and during a quiet interlude in their schedule, Hannibal had informed Will that bar any major international or domestic incident, there would be absolutely no work. He seemed almost offended by the thought of spending his leisure time on anything the nation needed. Will had secretly wanted to protest, that they couldn’t just abandon all the important progress Hannibal had made for fourteen days of inactivity, but the thought of being able to have Hannibal and Abigail all to himself was made the air in his lungs catch. It also sounded terrifying because it meant there was going to be no buffer between them and it would be so easy for Hannibal to see how odd he was, for Abigail to see that he wasn’t really parent material.

So with a knot in his stomach, he’d agreed that there would be no work.

*****

“Will, would you like to bring your dogs?” Hannibal offered over a lunch alone in California; he’d just delivered a commencement speech for students who’d just received their GEDs though an at-risk teen programme and they were sitting in a secluded private park in Pacific Palisades.

“Really?” Will paused as he plated their food, trying to arrange everything attractively.

Hannibal poured some sort of sparkling California wine into the wine glasses set out. The other staffers were sitting at surrounding picnic tables, their conversations distant enough that they were indiscernible and guaranteeing as much privacy as was possible.

Hannibal picked an olive off Will’s plate. “There is an animal transportation company that could bring them up the day before and there are caretakers for the compound to get them acquainted with the property.”

Will’s mind thought of the seven well behaved dogs back in Wolf Trap. “All of them?”

“Yes.”

“Sure! No, you’ll hate it,” he quickly protested, sensing it was a bad idea.

“We’re family, Will. Your dogs are welcome.” The President took another olive, small phenomena that would be rude if committed by anyone else or done to anyone else, but Will thought they made him seem so human, reachable, and so he nudged his plate forward, wanting him to have more. Hannibal smiled and looked up at him. “I am very sure. We will all enjoy it.”

*****

“If you enjoy sailing, I will procure a boat for you,” Hannibal asked as he cornered Will in the hallway between the Oval Office and dining room on a Wednesday afternoon.
“You don’t have to,” Will insisted, trying to step around the President. His body traitorously arched against Hannibal’s and he lowered his eyes, defiantly not allowing himself to smiling.

Hannibal’s hand twitched at his side and his voice suggested amusement. “It’s a favoured pastime of mine. It would be no trouble.”

“Okay,” he agreed.

Hannibal’s hand came up to lift Will’s chin, forcing eye contact. “Say ‘yes’, Will.”

Will quickly corrected himself. “Yes. Yes, I’d like that.”

Hannibal sealed the matter with a kiss, before letting Will go, returning to his office.

*****

“Are you planning on bringing your fishing gear, Will? I can arrange for you to visit a few of the nicer fishing locations during our stay,” Hannibal suggested as they rode in the back of Cadillac One to meet with the governor of New Jersey for a photo op to look at the newly rebuilt boardwalk in Jersey City.

“I…have some extra poles if you and Abigail want some lessons.” Will was embarrassed to even offer, the words sounding unimpressive.

Hannibal nodded. “Bring them.”

Then to his surprise, Hannibal leaned across to kiss him. Caught off guard by the unexpected affection, Will made a muffled noise, and was promptly released. His face burning, he quickly returned his attention to the prepared comments he’d been making notes on, but he couldn’t keep the smile off his face.

If asked later, the three agents sitting adjacent to them would deny having seen anything.

*****

“My luggage is packed, darling,” Hannibal informed him before leaning down to lick Will’s neck.

Will didn’t want to admit that he found making out and giving/getting handjobs in places of historical importance to be one of the highlights of working in the White House. Hannibal was lying on top of him in the Treaty Room, sharing the very uncomfortable Chippendale canapé, both still fully clothed. Will suspected that Hannibal found it amusing to have dignitaries seated where they’d gotten one another off, a substitute for the risqué art he wanted to hang on the walls. Will simply catalogued it away as a facet of the President’s humour that only he got to see.

“Glad to hear. Do it yourself?” Will teased as Hannibal’s hand played with him.

“Don’t be rude, Will.”

He gave a short gasp as the President sucked on his earlobe. “Right there,” he whispered, rubbing a hand affectionately across the back of Hannibal’s neck. “So you’re…all packed up and ready for summer.”

Will’s eyes drifted to one of the security cameras they’d covered upon entering the room; Secret Service had eyes everywhere and Hannibal had spent hours pointing out where each camera and microphone was located. Certain rooms contained hidden switches that allowed for the microphones
to be turned off—the one in the Treaty Room was located in the top drawer of the room’s desk. Cameras couldn’t be turned off, only covered, and Will had taken to carrying sticky notes in his jacket pocket so that when they temporarily covered the Secret Service’s vantage points, they wouldn’t leave any marks on the walls, paintings, and other various focal points in the rooms while they satisfied Hannibal’s needs.

Hannibal’s hand tightened around him a fraction. “Are you unable to follow my train of thought, Will?”

Will nodded, thrusting his hips up at a languid pace. Hannibal gave a throaty laugh against his shoulder then sat back up. Will frowned at him, preferring the full contact of their bodies, no matter how uncomfortable it was atop this antique furniture.

“Tell me what you meant,” Will demanded.


“Um…my luggage isn’t packed,” he offered, unsure what the correct answer was.

Hannibal didn’t seem impressed. “I know.”

“So maybe I should go home and pack?” Will couldn’t help but joke again, looking scandalised. “Are you throwing me out?”

Hannibal clucked his tongue. “My dear Will.”

Will didn’t want to play guessing games, didn’t want to be toyed with—if Hannibal wanted to be clever, he could use his mouth in other ways. But he closed his eyes under the other man’s scrutinising gaze, trying not to think of the steady hold of Hannibal’s hand. Empathy, empathy, he was supposed to piece and calculate this together while—he let out a muffled groan as a second hand entered his open zip to fondle his testicles. Why would it matter if Hannibal had packed his clothes already? They still had a week and a half before they—

Will’s eyes shot open and he studied Hannibal’s face. “President Lecter, are you informing me that you have packed everything so early not because you’re a very organised man, but because you’re excited to be getting away from the White House? With me?”

Hannibal didn’t answer with anything more than a smile, then got on his knees in front of the canapé and shifted Will’s trousers lower on his hips. Will sat up and spread his legs wider, grinning as Hannibal took him into his mouth. Will tipped his head back, fingers knotting up into Hannibal’s hair momentarily before he dropped his hands down to the other man’s broad shoulders; he didn’t want to direct him—partially because that seemed rude, but also because there was nothing he could suggest that was better than what Hannibal was offering. Will held onto Hannibal’s shoulders tightly, trying to stay as quiet as possible as he came. Hannibal swallowed everything and the following morning when Hannibal sat at the Treaty Room’s desk to record his weekly address to the nation for the White House’s website, Will sat on the canapé and kept a very serious expression on his face the entire time.

*****

The night before they were due to the summer property, her father had the entire camp that was to travel with them out to Boring House. Abigail understood that her father must have work in Baltimore as there was no real good excuse to stay the night at Aunt Bee’s. Abigail was grateful for Jack, who could make any of her father’s requests happen, no matter how nonsensical they sounded.
This was just another one of the President’s whims that everyone had to bend to and she felt a warmth in her chest that her father was powerful which meant by proxy, so was she.

She was sitting in her room, the one connected to her father’s by the shared bathroom, brushing up on her knowledge of human anatomy as she read through Gray’s Anatomy, tucking away different words and images in the kitchens of her memory palace. As she flirted with the thought of how she could possibly prepare a human brain while still in its skull, the bathroom door opened and her father stepped out silently. He was dressed head to toe in black, a small rucksack slung over one shoulder. Tonight she was staying in the room that had the entrance to the passageways in the closet.

“I must leave,” he said softly.

“Where are you going?” She already knew he was headed to the city, but she could at least pretend ignorance because he obviously had a plan he wanted to share, to gloat about his genius.

“I have a surprise for Will.” He had the hint of a smile, trying to censor his happiness in her presence.

She felt slightly better; if he had been planning on hunting without her again, she would have felt incredibly rejected. “Do you want help?”

“You are the distraction I require.” She’d expected as much and she shut her book, already formulating how she could keep Will’s attention for the hours that her father was gone.

“You know, they’re really keeping an eye out for anything suspicious. Don’t want a repeat of April,” she told him, slightly irritated by the amusement in his eyes, as though he was untouchable.

“I shall keep that in mind.”

She stood from the bed and hugged him close. Whatever he was up to held unnecessary risks and she could only hope that he was being rational, not just driven by some misguided need to impress.

“Be safe.” She could hear his heart beat beneath her ear.

“I will.”

He tried to pull away but her fingers were linked through his and she possessively demanded, “Promise me you’ll come home.”

“On my heart.”

Satisfied, she let him go. “I love you.”

He kissed her forehead. “And I you, Abigail.”

*****

Hannibal arrived back at the property just before three in the morning, entering through Bedelia’s office; she was sitting at her desk, looking exhausted and as she stood up, he placed a kiss on her cheek. Her polite smile relaxed and she motioned for him to hold the door open for her.

“Go to bed, Bedelia,” he murmured as they walked out together; the Secret Service agents that had been stationed in the hallway stood quickly from their chairs, their eyes blurry from a sedentary watch.

“Thank you, Hannibal.”
Hannibal parted from his cousin to return to the bedroom he was sharing with Will; he’d changed back into his suit in the main tunnel under the boathouse and looked no different than when he’d entered the office. Undressing in the dark of the bedroom, he decided against showering, and slipped into bed. Will was sleeping, but awoke as he drew the high thread count sheet over him. The younger man sat up, rubbing at his eyes, his voice thick and holding traces of that southern accent Hannibal wasn’t sure if he was fond of or not.

“I was wondering when I’d see you. Where were you?”

“Bedelia and I had things to discuss,” he murmured.

“Oh.” Will gave him a drowsy smile. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, as well.”

“Are you tired?”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. “I am not as young as I once was, Will.”

Will fumbled with his words. “That’s—that’s not what I meant.”

But Hannibal wasn’t offended, more than happy to be provided an outlet for his own emotions and an opportunity to keep Will’s thoughts from analysing why he was supposedly talking with his cousin until three in the morning. He thought Will looked beautiful with half lidded eyes and tousled hair.

“I wish to make love with you,” he informed him in the clinical manner that seemed to make the younger man breathless; sure enough, Will gave out a soft, “Oh,” as Hannibal pushed him onto his back and straddled him.

*****

“Dad, it’s time to wake up.”

Will stirred in the bed at the sound of Abigail’s voice and uncurled himself from Hannibal’s hold. It was still dark in the bedroom, dawn yet to fully arrive and he stretched out against the man he’d curled himself around in his sleep. Hannibal looked so beautiful when he slept and Will couldn’t help but touch his lips with his fingertips.

“It’s time to wake up,” he murmured, listening to Abigail’s feet leaving the space outside their shared bathroom.

“Yes,” Hannibal replied simply, eyes still closed.

Will kissed his bedmate, untangling his legs from the other man. “I’m going to go shower.”

“I must get the morning briefing from Jack. I’ll shower after you.”

“Okay.” Will leaned forward and kissed him on the lips, prompting Hannibal to smile despite having closed eyes still.

Two hours later as Marine One landed on the lawn between Boring House and the lake, and Will walked across the grass with Hannibal, trying not to look out at the boat house. He hefted the large bag he carried everywhere for the President in his hand, hoping he hadn’t left anything behind.

“Did you get enough sleep?” he asked, worried about the work the other man had been wrapped up
so late into the night with. Even the Vice President had decided to arrive at Hyannis Port later in the week rather than this morning.

“No,” Hannibal was willing to admit and Will felt his anxiety start to grow.

“When we get to Massachusetts, maybe you could lie down for a few hours. Abigail and I can, uh…”

He trailed off, not sure if he was overstepping his boundaries. While he cared for Hannibal and while they’d decided they were in a relationship, it didn’t mean that he was welcome to assert his own opinions about what the other man should and shouldn’t do.

But Hannibal gave him that small quirk of his lips and nodded his head once. “I believe that might be the best course of action. She will acquaint you with the property.”

There was no more talking as they boarded the massive Nighthawk; he and Hannibal were seated between Price and Beverly, and soon Jack and Abigail were seated between Matthews and Zeller. Will wanted to grab for Hannibal’s hand—the helicopter had lurched slightly at take off—but he had enough discipline not to, instead gripping his knees as he held his breath. The aircraft stabilised and they were flanked by the decoy Nighthawks and while he couldn’t see them, he knew there F-18 Hornets flying overhead as escorts. He still hadn’t ever become accustomed to flying in these loud machines and as Hannibal and Abigail were casually reading magazines, he took deep breaths and stared at Barney Matthew’s polished shoes. When his stomach finally settled, he looked out the windows at the land below. Mapped out were highways, country roads, small towns, forests, mountains, pastures…Will thought it was all so surreal, that he was flying over an entire unsuspecting world that he was responsible to care for because no matter what anyone thought, Hannibal was still his politician, his candidate to back and it was Will’s duty to make sure only the best had the job of running the country.

The Kennedy Compound was the most impressive piece of property Will had ever been on, including the that of the White House. There were three houses on the central and original piece of land but there were seven various adjoining properties; on the northeast side of the main house was Joseph Jr’s summer house, currently owned by the Vice President and then north of that was the Lecter summer home, which went by various names depending on who was asked—“Aunt Missy’s House”, “Lady Murasaki’s Residence”, “Silver House”—and was where he, the First Family, and Jack would be staying for the two week vacation. Marine One landed in an impressive display on the sprawling back lawn of the main house touching down a bit roughly because the grass sloped down to the ocean. Hannibal and Abigail disembarked together, hand in hand, and the handful of Kennedys that had arrived to spend the vacation with them spilled out across the grass to greet them with open arms.

While Will would have felt more comfortable walking with the President or at least Abigail over to their family property, Jack had already taken the responsibility of escorting him to summer house. Like the rest of the houses on the compound, Silver House was a white-frame clapboard house typical of vacation residences on Cape Cod. Something in the paint had caused the white to turn slightly grey and Will could imagine that with the light of dawn on it, it would glow silver, hence it’s name. Almost the entirety of the backyard was overtaken by a massive flower garden, a chaotic mélangé of plants that hardly seemed to fit the President’s aesthetics, but perhaps had been the traditional order of things for the home and thusly never changed. Will secretly preferred it to the well manicured grass and hedges he could see.

Upon reaching the backdoor, one of the compound’s caretakers informed him that various members of the Kennedy family had taken his dogs to play and socialise with; cold dread filled Will, which he
knew was irrational as the dogs were in good hands, but out of his sight and with strangers, he felt the need to panic. He gave an uncomfortable smile and allowed someone to bring him a glass of lemonade as he sat in the kitchen, fidgeting as he waited for the President to arrive.

Relief came ten (long) minutes later when Hannibal arrived with the Secret Service agents they’d travelled with. The caretakers were dismissed from the house for the rest of the vacation and after inviting the agents to enjoy the refreshments that had been laid out, he gave Will a pointed look.

“Will, if you will come with me.” Will grabbed the bag he carried for the President and once out of the listening range, Hannibal said quietly, “Abigail shall be taking the master bedroom on the north side of the house. You and I shall have my former room. It will guarantee us more privacy.”

Will suddenly found himself grinning and he ducked his head as he followed after Hannibal. He hated the constant sneaking around and now for two weeks he wouldn’t have to. There was a door at the end of the main hall on the second floor and Hannibal opened it, standing aside to allow Will inside first.

“So this was your room?” Will asked, as he set down the bag he carried, looking around curiously.

The room smelt as though it had recently been aired out recently; flowers had been arranged fresh from the garden and the four poster bed had been made with crisp sheets and a hand-sewn quilt coverlet. It was a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere, far different than the expensive looking environment he was expecting Hannibal to gravitate towards. Perhaps it reminded him of a simpler time.

“Yes.”

“I bet it was nice to spend the summer here,” Will looked at the tall book cases and the heavy desk.

“Because you never had a bedroom of your own as a child,” Hannibal pointed out.

Will bristled and instinctively reached to find his glasses. “That’s not what I meant,” he said cooly. Hannibal was silent for a moment, then in a tone gentler, corrected himself. “I apologise. I misinterpreted your words.”

“It’s not a big deal. You didn’t mean anything.” Will walked to the windows, which had a special cling film over the glass to prevent anyone from looking in with a telephoto lens. “This view is amazing.”

“It is.” Hannibal came to stand behind him and pointed out the different things they could see from their vantage point. “To our right is my Uncle Joseph’s summer house. Bedelia and I would walk through the garden border to have tea together in the morning. The woman with the red sweater shell is my cousin Caroline. I shall be making her Ambassador to Japan in November. The fence at the far side of the main house holds the tennis courts.” Hannibal’s hand came to touch Will’s waist and he spoke quietly into Will’s ear. “We can’t see them from here, but the docks are located at Grandfather Joseph’s house. I shall take you to see the boats tomorrow.” Will relaxed back against the other man, still wary that something was waiting to happen and always observant, Hannibal was quick to reassure. “My family has come out to visit, not conduct a survey into our personal lives. This will be the first time many of them have seen me since I took the oath of office. They shall be staying at various parts of the property and in town. You won’t need to worry about our privacy being compromised.”

“Good to know.” Will remembered he still had to bring their bags up—luggage was an assistant’s
job, not the president’s. “Um, where am I supposedly staying? So that if I can’t come back in here without tipping someone off…”

“There is a guest room next to mine that shall serve as your cover, lest anyone ask. You mustn’t worry, Will.” He placed a chaste kiss against Will’s cheek before pulling away. “I think I shall rest for a while.”

Will nodded quickly, wanting to get out of the way. “Sure. Anything you need me to do?”

“Check on Abigail and the dogs. Enjoy your free time.”

“No problem, Mr President.” Will began to walk towards the door.

Hannibal caught him by the arm and corrected, “President Lecter, Will. The moniker ‘Mr President’ is informal.”

“Right.” Will snuck another kiss from the man as he was directed out of the bedroom. “Get some rest, President Lecter.”

“I might just be able to civilise you yet, Mr Graham.”

*****

That night there was a party held at the main house, spreading out over the back lawn. Well, less of a party and more of a soirée—there was quiet music playing off a cd player someone had brought out and there was a food and beer as everyone mingled under the night sky. There were dozens of people in attendance, all tied together with the same common thread of belonging to the prestigious lineage of Joseph Kennedy and Rose Fitzgerald. Will didn’t want to be there, but Jack had suggested in a very sinister that he attend, reminding Will that Kennedys weren’t just people he could brush off; they held too much power and they were people who loved Hannibal dearly—if he tried to alienate himself from them, they would have him removed from White House, because ‘they won’t put up with that type, Will’.

Will began to suspect that Jack was really just showing him off as the conquest the Lecter administration had taken so much pride in and while that thought made him angry, he could also admit that he was always going to represent Hannibal for as long as they were together and at the very least he could play the part, so he had dressed in a pair of chinos and the light blue shirt Hannibal had bought him.

“I love seeing you in that shirt,” Hannibal had crooned into his ear after dinner when they were dressing for the party; Will had gone red in the face and tried to mumble something sarcastic, but couldn’t muster enough impudence to be effective.

Will was prepared to admit that he enjoyed studying the dynamics of the people in attendance—this was a political analyst’s wet dream, though his for slightly different reasons than brushing elbows and making connexions. No, this was interesting for him because it was looking at the past and the future occurring at the same time; on one end of the spectrum, he was able to watch the culmination of everything Joseph Kennedy Sr had strived to create his family into, and on the other, he was able to see who was walking on gold brick roads to prominent career. Perhaps not all of them were presidential material, but he’d already spotted five potential governors, a vice president, at least a dozen representatives, and yet another dozen senators. His mind kicked into overdrive, trying to form patterns and pathways to organise their futures in the right directions, and he finally he had to force his brain to look for something more stable—
Like his pseudo-daughter, Abigail.

Abigail was fawned over by everyone, all insisting she was much too beautiful to not be on every magazine in the country and repeatedly addressing her as ‘Crew’, which seemed to be a reference to her time on the Sidwell Friends’ rowing team. Will had watched her from a distance, smiling at how she commanded the attention of the people around her in the same manner her dad did. And it was nice to see her interacting with people—he knew Marissa’s death had hit her hard and there was little opportunity for her to develop relationships in the White House that she could feel safe with. But here she already knew everyone and his constant source of anxiety when it came to her happiness was alleviated.

Everyone here was addressed by a prefix before their name so as to identify the different Katherines, Peters, Patricks, Kathleens, Roses, Roberts, and Johns, so everyone had ‘uncle/aunt/cousin/little/big’; Will could see why—the majority of the names were recycled within the family multiple times in a generation, sometimes even among siblings. Then there were the nicknames. Everyone had variations of New England prep names—Buffy, Van, Topsy, Trip—Will’s head spun as he quickly catalogued every person that introduced themselves to him, everyone offering warm handshakes and familial connexions—“I’m Little Jack’s father” “I’m Wog’s older sister” “Maria’s my mother”—that had him creating less of a family tree in his mind and more of a family spider web. Will wished he’d created a dossier on the extensive list of members in the dynasty before he’d come here and while he knew that most of them had only flown in for the first two days of Hannibal’s arrival, he still felt a sense of responsibility to know whom everyone in Hannibal’s adoptive kingdom was.

Hannibal had stayed with him at the beginning of the evening, considerately managing to keep the conversation away from him and allowing him simply to be the silent observer. However, when Hannibal went to go retrieve something for them to drink, Will found himself abducted by one of the cousins—Cousin Polly?—and dragged off to be introduced to other family members he hadn’t met yet. He lost sight of Hannibal, trying not to look desperate as he scanned the sea of heads for the one person he actually was here for. He was passed off to an Aunt Dale (“I was named after Dale Evens, of course!”) who introduced him to her grown children and after being asked if he was excited to finally have a vacation, he was taken by ‘Blond Rory’ to meet a few of the relatives who had been in congress at one point. He was then taken by one of the men who’d served as a representative to go join another conversation.

“Hannibal was called ‘Win’ for one summer—remember that? Uncle Ted trying to rename him ‘Win’?” The group of very sophisticated cousins laughed at the story and Will smiled slightly, trying to imagine Hannibal getting a family endearment. “Uncle Ted couldn’t let anyone stay around him for longer than an hour without giving them a name of some sort. Obviously ‘Win’ never stuck and I think Hannibal was pretty relieved.”

“And your nickname?” Will needed a way to differentiate yet another Patrick’. “Wog.” He rolled his eyes. “Uncle Ted thought it was very clever.”

A ‘Cousin-Mary-But-Everyone-Calls-Me-Cuffy’ nodded to Will. “Will, you must tell us about yourself. You’ve hardly talked all night.”

There were friendly, expectant smiles and Will felt himself freeze, unable to think of a way to get out of talking about himself—he knew that even walking way would simply prompt them to follow, waiting for answers. “Well…”

And then there was the wonderfully exotic voice of the man he was tolerating all of this for. “I certainly hope my cousins are not interrogating you, my dear Will. They could drag information out of anyone given enough time. It’s the Kennedy charm.”
Everyone’s head turned to look behind Will and Will couldn’t help but give Hannibal a look that hopefully translated as ‘About time you returned!’ and Hannibal simply smiled as though he had no shame, slipping a bottle of beer into his hand, cold relief that he quickly began to drink so he wouldn’t have to answer.

“We aren’t harassing your assistant, Hannibal. We’re merely curious to know who you’ve brought along with you,” one of the younger cousins stated, her cheeks slightly pink from the sparkling wine she’d been drinking.

Another friend cousin reminds, “You know we don’t let anyone leave a stranger.”

Hannibal smiled and catches Will’s eyes over the frames of his glasses for a moment. “Well, I worry that if I let you befriend him, he won’t come back to Washington with me.”


“I am no match for you, Mary. And I don’t wish for Patrick to lure him back to Massachusetts.” Will knew Hannibal’s body language well enough to know that despite his smile, he felt no humour.

Patrick laughed and turned to Will. “I can pay you double what they’re giving you.” The tone was joking, but Will knew he was completely serious.

Abigail approached the conversation, now positioning herself between Will and proclaimed Cousin ‘Wog’. “What are we talking about?”

Cousin-Mary-But-Everyone-Calls-Me-Cuffy gave a gaptoothed grin at the young woman. “Your father and Pat are fighting over who gets to keep your dad’s assistant once the vacation is over.”

“Well, he was Dad’s friend first, so I think that means Will is going to come back to the White House with us,” she said casually before bringing her can of carbonated cranberry juice to her lips. “We’ve got dibs.”

“Oh, you’re friends?” one of the cousins nicknamed Polly asked excitedly as everyone looked between the two of them. “Hannibal, you didn’t tell us you found yourself a friend.”

This earned a bit of laughter among the group and Will braced himself for the inevitable questions about what the exact nature of their relationship was, braced himself for the public outing or the public denial of what he meant to the Lecters, both painful. But the questions never came, instead venturing down a course that sounded familiar.

The other Patrick of the group grinned at Hannibal. “I believe that brings the total up to two. If we’re counting Bedelia.”

Will glanced over at Hannibal, unable to mask his disbelief. He knew Hannibal was a fairly solitary man, but unlike Will, he didn’t have anxiety and neuroses that kept him from reaching out and gaining friends. Hannibal didn’t look at him, instead replying that Bedelia had decided that she didn’t count as a friend. Will continued absorbing the conversation on a subconscious level as he drank the rest of the beer, considering the implications of being considered Hannibal’s only friend to anyone’s memory. Georgia really hadn’t been exaggerating when she’d said Hannibal hadn’t socialised since reaching the White House and it was now obvious that that would be a continuing trend, not because he was too busy, but because there was no one to invite over.

After another twenty minutes of Hannibal subtly making sure that the conversation never really returned to the topic of Will again, he explained he was ready to retire for the night and Will carefully
offered to head back to the property with him under the guise of running over his schedule for the following day. As many of the Kennedys had held a political office at some point or another, none questioned this and Hannibal said their goodnights before he and Will took their leave.

They walked side by side to across the sweeping lawns to the Lecter summer home and as Will listened to the sounds of the party growing distant, he was suddenly overwhelmed with a flood of questions he wanted to ask Hannibal—*Do you really not like people? Didn’t you have friends growing up? Or were you always too different, like me? Did your family ever try to encourage you to have friends? Was it just easier to spend your time with Bedelia? And if you don’t form friendships, did you ever form relationships? Am I different? Or am I just caught in your wake? You sounded jealous at the thought someone else might take me away from Washington. Were you? You didn’t deny that we were friends. Are you happy that we’re involved with one another? Did you know that you’re the only person I’m grateful to share my time with? That when I think about you and Abigail, I have to be careful I don’t say the words ‘my family’ aloud so that I don’t give us away? Or will I find out that you don’t think me of me as your family and you’ll break my heart? Have you ever shared a bed with someone on a regular basis? You’re my first. Am I yours?*—but he said nothing, simply remained quiet. The two agents that had accompanied them were walking not far behind them and instinctually Will created some distance between himself and Hannibal. But that was stupidly unnecessary because the agents assigned to the President already knew about their relationship and was insulting to Hannibal—Will wasn’t ashamed of being with him; guilt overtook him and he drifted close again.

When they reached the house, they were greeted by various agents; Hannibal left a few instructions regarding Abigail’s return and then he ushered Will up the stairs. His mind was still caught at the way everyone had responded to him at the party.

“Won’t your family suspect something?” Will finally asked as they entered the bedroom.

Hannibal walked over to the oscillating vintage fan on the desktop in the corner of the room and turned it on. “Perhaps some of the younger cousins. Everyone else is under the illusion I don’t require human relationships.”

Will feigned astonishment. “You do?”

“You’re very funny, Will,” Hannibal said with the dry tone that Will had come to understand meant he’d said something very clever.

“Am I…your friend?” Will asked as he kicked off his shoes, leaving them neatly beside the door.

“Yes.”

Even with all of Will’s empathy, he still doubted asserting what was now obvious to him. “You’re my only friend, too.”

“It’s difficult to create friendships from acquaintances when there is such a large bridge to span between our minds and theirs. They are well meaning, but they don’t understand us.” Hannibal’s hand hovered beside Will’s, the faint contact offered until Will finally grabbed for him. “We understand one another. You and I are just alike.”

“We’re not alike,” Will corrected him gently, because Hannibal, in so many ways, was his entire opposite. A handsome, sophisticated, accomplished man whom Will would follow to the ends of the earth, simply because he treated him like an extravagant gift, but never like something delicate.

“You are,” the President pulled him close, “exactly like me, Will.” Hannibal’s touch was affectionate
and Will couldn’t help but seek the contact, leaning into him. “And one day, I’m going make you see that.”

There was a knock on the door and Will instinctually withdrew, allowing the distance to create the illusion that the bedroom could be a work environment. The voice on the other side of the door revealed that it was Hannibal’s senior agent.

“President Lecter?”

Hannibal opened the door. “Yes, Agent Price.”

A file was handed over. “This just came in.”

“Thank you, Agent Price.”

The agent was dismissed and Hannibal shut the door once more. Will watched Hannibal open the file, looking it over and he hoped it wasn’t some national security threat that would force them back to Washington.

“It appears the Chesapeake Ripper has struck again,” Hannibal announced and Will hurried over to his side to look at what was inside the folder.

Jammed down the throat of a man sitting in a chair upon the stage of the Meyerhoff was what looked to be a cello neck. His neck had been opened, displaying the inner workings of his throat. Arms limp at his side, there was no doubt the man was dead.

“Well, that’s different,” Will commented, his stomach turning sour.

The President had stilled and his voice sounded distant. “This is Douglas Wilson, one of the trombonists from the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.”

Will turned to look up at Hannibal’s face, worried that he might find distress, but not cruel enough to deny him comfort. “Did you know him?”

“We met once.” Hannibal looked thoughtful, his disquiet minimal. “Such an unfortunate way to leave the orchestra, though I cannot help but think the brass section will be better for it.”

Will nodded, returning his attention to the file, allowing the other man to take the photos while he looked over the faxed report. “Not a good player?”

“Not particularly. His family made considerable donations in the right places to get him there. He should never have been allowed in.”

“Possible grudge, then. Someone who didn’t think he should be there. We should look at anyone associated with the orchestra.”

Will filled away the facts he read, letting the information pour into his mind. Unlike working with the profiles of politicians, police reports didn’t hide anything, did lie or conceal to avoid someone’s embarrassment. The brutal honesty was soothing in a way.

Hannibal held over one of the photos that showed a closeup of the filleted neck. “What do you make of this?”

“Uh…” he glanced over the photo, then returned his attention to the preliminary report. “Standard.”

The President was silent for a few seconds and then in choked out, “Standard?”
Will looked up to see a very complex expression on Hannibal’s face and immediately rushed to explain himself, not wanting to look as though he found horribly mutilated people something that no longer affected him.

“Oh, well, I mean, obviously not ‘standard’ for a serial killer, but standard for the Ripper’s skill. It’s…well done. He’d very talented with a knife—we already know that. Standard,” he reiterated, hoping that his explanation was reassuring.

Hannibal’s face relaxed to its neutral state. “I see.”

“I don’t want to start waxing poetic about him.”

“Do you wish to?”

“Not intentionally. I can appreciate it. I can see what he’s doing and why.” He shrugged a shoulder, willing to admit that this time the Chesapeake Ripper had outdone himself. “Though this is so unique.”

“Are we sure it’s him, then?” Hannibal asked.

Will smirked. “This is him. It’s written all over. It’s these elaborate details he adds, the way he’s created the scene.” Then he frowned, walking over to the bed and spreading out the photos on the blanket. “This means something different, though. He’s communicating a new message—” It hit him hard. “Oh.”

Hannibal came to stand behind him, his voice quiet. “What do you see, Will?”

Will closed his eyes and allowed the pendulum to swing back and forth slowly. He stood in one of the aisles of the Meyerhoff, looking up the stage where a single spotlight illuminated the body.

“He’s trying to attract someone like him. He’s not delusional. He actually knows that the other person could look at this and be inspired,” he said as he walked up to the stage, eyes searching for every small detail possible.

In his mind, he placed Hannibal in the empty audience. The President sat in the front row, expressionless as he stared at Will. Will walked around the stage, trying reconstruct the crime scene as accurately as he could from the photos; he noted that the fact he’d been here once before and his memories of the performance he’d attended were helping.

Hannibal interrupted his thoughts. “Inspired in what way? To kill?”

He looked down at the President, his mind fleetingly acknowledging how handsome he looked in his tuxedo. “Maybe.”

This was an electrical pulse, sent out into the dark ocean. His breath hitched at the thought of two bodies in the shadowy recesses, neither male nor female, faceless, twisting and knotting together in coitus, the soft satisfied gasps of passion. ‘There’s some real heat in the fucking,’ he acknowledged, wetting his lips. Returning his attention to the dead man sitting in the chair, he reflected deeper on what his mind was attempting to peace together.

“He’s like an eel. Mating,” he murmured, walking around the body of the man.

They generated electrical pulses like song birds sing to attract another of its kind. Electrical pulses that no one could hear but had to be felt. A silent call to mate. There was a cello bow across the man’s thighs and Will picked it up, studying the white horse hairs; somewhere in the back of his
mind he remembered something about string instruments he’d read many, many years ago. He slapped the stick across his palm and a plume of resin rose from the hairs.

“There is a widely held belief that white hair produces a smoother sound and black hair produces a rougher sound. I wanted you to hear everything clearly—we can save the rough noises for what came out of his throat when he was still alive,” he told Hannibal.

“Very good, Will. I didn’t realise you knew anything about bows. Do you suppose this instrument maker would want the conductor to request coll’arco, then? It means ‘with the bow’. The other way to play is col lento, ‘with the wood’. The player is instructed to strike the string with the stick of the bow, rather than by drawing the hair of the bow across the strings. This results in a quiet, but eerie percussive sound. Of course, there is the col lento tratto, where one draws the wood of the bow across the string. The sound produced by col legno tratto is very quiet, with an overlay of white noise, but the pitch of the stopped note can be clearly heard.”

“With the bow. I want you to hear the sweet sounds I hear when I look at you.” Will stared intently at Hannibal, who refused to look away.

“Is his mate responding?”

“No. Not yet. This is an invitation. Flirting. Sending your lover flowers and candy before asking them out for dinner and a movie.”

He can feel Hannibal smiling from the front row. “Is he asking to have his paramour join him? Or is he asking to participate in other activities with them?”

“He wants his lover to flirt back. He doesn’t just a ‘yes, I’ll go out with you’.”

“Will his lover respond to him with an equal gift?”

Will paused, evaluating the scene and realisation dawned on him. “They’re not…they’re lovers, but there’s a level of intimacy that doesn’t exist. Not yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“The man who’s killing—his lover doesn’t know. They don’t ‘see’ him yet.”

This was about power, a display in the way a male peacock spread his tail and plumage to impress the mind and capture the heart of another. Light fanned around man’s head in a halo, the way painting of saints had nimbus and aureole around them, Will saw that this trombonist had been transformed into something made of pure love. ‘I made this for you. I wanted you to see how beautiful you are to me. So I’m giving you something back that can only start to compare to you. When you see it, you’ll know. You’ll know it was for you alone.’ Will swallowed hard, shifting the front of his trousers.

“He’s…it’s mating. This one is about mating.”

He brought the bow up to the man’s throat, guessing at how to properly hold it and drew it across the exposed muscles slowly. He heard no notes, but instead was infused with the deep pangs of desire and admiration and affection the killer had felt when he’d made this abomination of an instrument.

“Do you hear it?” he asked softly. “It’s our song.”

“Courting?”
“Maybe.” He set the bow back down on the man’s legs. “Seems to know his other half wouldn’t be satisfied with just flowers.”

“Wouldn’t you offer the one you want everything their heart desires?”

Will smirked, found himself sitting beside the President in the front row. “I don’t think you’d be particularly happy if I got the Meyerhoff shut down because of a crime scene investigation.”

Hannibal’s lips twitched slightly. “Perhaps not.”

“He’s serenading,” Will said hesitantly as he returned his attention to the man on the stage, feeling the ugliness quelling just beneath the surface of his words; there was no need to drag the hideousness of what he thought to the light.

“You needn’t fight your thoughts with me, Will. I will accept you.”

Will opened his eyes to find himself standing in the bedroom once more. “He loves this person very much. You don’t just…make art for cops. He wanted to give a sculpture, a living sculpture for his beloved to enjoy. Something personal. To see.”

“See what?”

“I don’t know.” He glanced over the file on the bed, seeing the large, horrific 8x11 photograph of the man on the stage. “It would have to be someone who had access to the hall, someone who’d be able to view it. The general public doesn’t have access, so possibly cleaning staff, employees of the symphony, performers…possibly a member of law enforcement. Look for anyone who has repeated access to these scenes.”

Hannibal was standing directly behind him, his voice unreadable. “Would they enjoy what they saw?”

Will wished that the killer didn’t get off on the thought of someone looking at his work. “They would appreciate it.”

Hannibal’s arms wrapped slowly around Will, one of his hands caressing at the front of Will’s trousers, palming the substantial erection he had from the photos, and Will shifted uncomfortably.

“Hannibal.”

Hannibal made no effort to stop, his lips pressing soft kisses against Will’s neck as his long fingers worked at Will’s belt and fly. “Forgive me, Will. I merely am in awe of you in this moment.”

“Let me get out of this mindset and then we can…”

“Yes,” Hannibal breathed against his ear, but he was already pulling Will’s trousers down, a warm hand sliding into his shorts to touch his hot skin.

Will grasped the other man’s wrists. “Hannibal, wait.”

“My apologies.” Hannibal wiped his wet lips against the back of his hand. His pupils were dilated wide.

“I’ll…I’ll just be a minute,” Will assured as he backed away to the bathroom, slightly hunched over in a juvenile attempt to hide his erection.

Something ravenous waited beneath Hannibal’s skin. “I shall count the seconds.”
Alone in the bathroom, Will splashed water on his face with one hand, trying to apply pressure to himself with the other. God, he hadn’t ever become aroused during the case files before. It was dreadful—Will didn’t want Hannibal to get the wrong idea about him, didn’t want him to think that this was a normal thing for him. It reminded him of high school when he’d been wrapped up in the horrific serial rapist and murderer that had plagued the city he and his dad had stayed in for three months. And now the offering of Hannibal—his eyes fluttered slightly, wishing he could have the crutch of his glasses to hide the onslaught of anxiety.

When Will returned, he found the bed cleared of the file—that had been set on the bookcase by the door—and Hannibal had removed his shoes and locked the door. The bottle of lube he’d packed was on the nightstand and Will blushed at the sight of it.

“Hannibal—“

Will found himself pressed face down into bed, not roughly or aggressively, but possessively. He belonged to Hannibal and he tried to ease into the mattress, muscles still coiled. The mouth at the back of his neck was hot and Will’s eyes rolled back into his head as he moaned, half heartedly trying to get out from under him. Hannibal seemed content to pin him down and rut against him through their clothes.

“I would like you tonight, Will,” the other man murmured into his ear.

“Yes,” he hissed, lifting his hips.

“I’d like for you to undress now.”

Hannibal’s body pulled away from Will’s and Will was quick to obey the request, fumbling out of his clothing quickly, nearly tripping as he yanked his left pant leg over his ankle. The President, of course, took his time folding his clothing and setting them on the dresser, disrobing as though it was an art. Which Will supposed it was, as Hannibal looked absolutely stunning; Will knelt on the bed, watching him in silence.

“I shall be leaving the lights on,” Hannibal told him as he crossed back over to the bed.

Will wasn’t keen on that idea. “Oh, uh…”

“I enjoy looking at you,” Hannibal explained, joining him on the bed.

“Oh.”

Hannibal smiled, a very hungry expression. “I truly do, Will.”

“Oh…” Will groaned loudly into the mattress, his fingers gripping at the sheets as his body was covered by Hannibal.

“And Abigail will be sleeping on the other side of the house—we needn’t censor ourselves,” Hannibal murmured in his ear, the smile evident in his voice.


Hannibal kissed his temple. “Let them.”

Will couldn’t help but laugh nervously, unsure what he was supposed to say to that. Public displays of sexual behaviour—even if it was only to be heard—always seemed to scream of narcissism to Will when he had to deal with politicians who had a need to be exhibit their sexual conquests.
Rapidly his mind went returned to analysis mode and he appraised the situation. Was Lecter actively seeking out to advertise his involvement with Will tonight? 94% affirmative. A demonstration of his prowess or of the partner he’d picked? 80-85%, 12% affirmative. What was the likelihood this was an example from Lecter to show the power he held over Will? 89% affirmative. An example for Will to the power he held over him? 5% affirmative—Hannibal didn’t need to be that crude.

Hannibal pulled back to retrieve the bottle of lubricant on the nightstand and Will brought his hands over his stomach because the absence of the other man’s body was too much of a sudden temperature change, despite how warm the room already was. Did it matter to Will if the Secret Service heard? Will stared at the ceiling. ‘This is a hangup, the last attempts to cling to some sort of societally established constructs of what masculinity is,’ his brain informed him clinical tones. ‘I have to work with these people everyday and they’re going to know something about me I wouldn’t ever share in the first place,’ he countered, but the analysing side of his brain had never been subtle or quiet. ‘It’ll be just for him.’

“He’s a hangup,” he hissed and rolled over so that he was on his hands and knees.

He was trying not to shake and grit his teeth as Hannibal’s body returned to the bed, kneeling behind him.

“Are you ready, Will?” Hannibal asked softly.

Will was never going to be ready, so now was just a good time as any. He nodded anxiously, forgetting that Hannibal might not see and then had to vocalise it when Hannibal continued to pause. The push of the slick finger was gentle and Will felt Hannibal using his other hand to give him reassuring pets on his thigh.

Hannibal was whispering soft words of praise, reassuring Will that ‘we are in no rush’ and ‘you are doing fine, you should not feel embarrassed’. God, how could someone be so considerate? Will considered sex a rush job at best and while he’d lasted a good amount of time with Hannibal, it had mostly been to impress him, not necessarily to please him. As he let out a small cry from a fingertip brushing across his prostate, he vowed to never take sex lightly again. A second finger was added soon after that, as well as more praise and the injection of observations that sounded both filthy and decadent with the man’s accent—‘Oh Will, how well you take my fingers. I hope you are as eager as I to see how well you take the rest of me,’; ‘Sweet boy, you are doing so well. Did you ever think you might find yourself in this position?’(that particular question was asked as the President abruptly spread his legs wider, giving a quiet laugh to punctuate the double entendre)—and the head of his cock brushing across the back of Will’s left thigh. Will was almost dizzy by the third finger, pleading rhythmically for ‘more’, unable to articulate the words ‘just fuck me, please.’

Fingers withdrew and he was left with the sudden panic that what was to come next would be territory he’d never crossed into and there were only seconds left to back out before he felt—

“Oh,” he breathed; Hannibal was leant over his body and a steady pressure suddenly filled him. Hannibal kissed along Will’s spine, ever so tenderly as he allowed Will to become completely accustomed to the new sensation—foreign and exquisite and not as shameful as he’d feared. Will rocked his hips, needing to mimic the feeling of having fingers inside him and found that, oh, this was so much better, to have this fullness. Overwhelmed, he had to press his face into the mattress as he breathed shallowly, trying to ground himself; blindly, he reached a hand back for Hannibal and was quickly given a hand to hold onto, fingers twining together in an intimacy that he’d never known before. There were no words exchanged between them and when he pushed himself back up, Hannibal licked at the sweat on the nape of his neck, causing Will to shiver, causing Will to smile.

“I have incredible stamina, Will,” Hannibal whispered into his ear.
“Fuck,” he hissed, almost angry because that was such a brilliant thing to consider and he wanted it, while still fearing it.

“We could make this last all night long. We could finish as the sun begins to rise over the horizon,” the other man told him, his voice almost guttural.

Will’s eyes rolled back into his head. “Oh, god.”

“Not tonight.” Hannibal kissed Will’s shoulders.

“But soon,” Will whispered.

“Yes, my dear Will.” More kisses along his neck and back. “My sweet Will.”

“I didn’t know it could feel like this.”

Hannibal laughed softly against his neck and Will had to laugh at himself as well. He hadn’t meant to admit it aloud as he rocked back slowly, luxuriating in the feeling of having the other man inside him, trying to explore the desire he felt. Soon he was reduced to mindlessly pushing his hips back against Hannibal, who was no longer draped across his back, but upright; Will was left acknowledging that while he was the one being penetrated, he was definitely the one setting the pace and the depth and controlling every last bit of the moment. He was moaning and drowning in the sound of Hannibal’s steady breathing and firm hands on his hips. This control was delicious, this trust in Hannibal was intoxicating, could he—could he just surrender for a moment? Let himself have that blindness Hannibal seemed to deliver whenever he offered a comforting touch? He stilled, considering all the possibilities, trying to catch his breath.

He was motionless for too long and Hannibal’s hands tightened on Will’s hips as concern laced his voice. “Is every—”

“I want—you—” He moaned loudly, seeking more movement, moving in an excruciatingly slow way because it was contradicting what he was trying to ask. “Please, I need…I need you…”

“You wish to have me lead,” Hannibal finished.

“Lead. God, like they were dancing and not simply christening the President’s childhood bed.

“Yes, fuck, please,” he begged.

The hands moved from his hips and up his back to push down on his shoulders, slowly forcing him to lie face down while still on his knees. It wasn’t uncomfortable, but certainly startling. But this was what he’d wanted from the moment Hannibal had propositioned him and so he complied, trying not to seem hesitant. The pace became quicker, but maintained a steady rhythm, prompting Will to think of the word ‘metronome’ and he spread his legs, bowing his head. His erection had started to flag and he reached back to stroke himself, palming the still damp glans, wanting to have his hand match the speed of the thrusts when suddenly Hannibal pulled out, causing Will to jerk his head up, needing to look back at the other man.

“Why—no—” he begged, the panic of rejection flaring hard in him—if he wasn’t supposed to touch himself, he hadn’t known.

“On your back.” Hannibal pulled one of the many pillows from the head of the bed as Will obediently did as he was told and with a wicked grin, Hannibal moved it under Will’s hips. “For leverage.”
Will choked on a laugh, desperately nodding because right now, anything Hannibal could suggest would sound logical and good. Fingers returned to touch him again and he closed his eyes, rolling his hips up. ‘It’s a submissive gesture to expose the belly, to expose an erection in the animal kingdom,’ he thought fleetingly as he planted his feet firmly on the mattress, knees up and expectant.

And yet nothing came. Hannibal simply sat back on his heels, looking at Will with an unreadable expression, leaving Will uncomfortable and self-conscious at whatever the older man was thinking about him. Hannibal looked like a Greek statue and Will…well, he didn’t look like he belonged here in bed with Hannibal. Will finally sat up, reaching one hand out to wrap around Hannibal’s cock and the other to the back of Hannibal’s neck, trying to pull him into a kiss. As he stroked him, he finally managed coax the other man to lie down on top of him. He was desperate, unravelled completely. Why was he feeling like this? The absolute desire to consume and to…surrender wasn’t the right word. To be seen. He needed to be seen on this bed, to be recognised and acknowledged—it felt so contradictory to the way Hannibal’s gaze made him squirm. ‘I need my mind looked at, not the skin,’ he decided and tipped his head back to expose his neck, trying to display every act of submission he could think of, wanting to show that he was ready for this. Hannibal could take anything he wanted and Will wouldn’t fight him.

So Hannibal took.

Will had no idea why Hannibal moved down his body, kissing and touching before taking Will’s cock into his mouth. Will whined softly, not knowing how to understand this turn of events. It was amazing and frustrating and he lifted his head up to watch him. The way Hannibal’s eyes watched him, lips surrounding him, was completely obscene and Will threw his head back, shuddering at the amount of pleasure coursing through him. The warmth around his cock left and Will felt the mattress dip as Hannibal moved back up his body to capture his lips again; he could taste himself and it didn’t disgust him as he assumed it would. The kiss deepened and Will moaned into Hannibal’s mouth, lifting his hips up in a demand for contact. Fingers returned between his legs, then withdrew before a blunt heat sought its return and Will whispered, “Yes, yes!” as the luscious feeling returned. Hannibal was laughing softly against him then dipped his head to kiss along Will’s jaw and neck, whispering desire thick words that Will couldn’t understand. He brought his hands up over the President’s shoulders as he started thrusting and he let out an indulgent sound at how wonderful it all felt. His fingers were desperate to rake across Hannibal’s skin, but he didn’t dare risk breaking the man’s skin, cautious of tarnishing something so immaculate and beautiful.

“Yes,” Hannibal finally whispered into his ear and Will dragged his fingernails harshly against the other man’s back, shivering.

He wanted to be rough tonight, he wanted savagery and mutilation, he wanted blood beneath his fingernails and he groaned as Hannibal pushed deeper. Bringing his legs up to wrap around the other man’s waist, he could suddenly imagine tearing the other man open until he saw bones and muscles, watching how the body worked while in flagrante delicto—

Will’s eyes snapped open, horrified that his mind had gone in that direction when he was enjoying the best sex of his life. Hannibal was saying something to him and Will was transfixed by the bob of his adam’s apple, the thought of how he’d look if Will could just cut away the skin, how he could open up that beautiful throat to watch the way his vocal chords thrummed with every word—Will lifted his hips up at the thought of trying to see what gave Hannibal that delicious accent, imagining the helpless noises as the vulnerable, tender skin was exposed for Will to study.

He wanted to make Hannibal sing.

Belatedly it occurred to him that he was still in the killer’s mindset—possession, desire, hunger, the
need to give—and as he opened his mouth to protest, to tell Hannibal that they needed to stop immediately, the other man’s hand came up to cover his mouth.

“I’ve changed my mind, Will. I don’t want to share your voice with anyone tonight,” Hannibal murmured into his ear.

Will moaned helplessly and pleaded against Hannibal’s palm, but he received no mercy, unable to channel any distress at his predicament and succumbed to a wave of pleasure, feeling the Chesapeake Ripper trying to fight his way to the surface. Yes, he could make Hannibal’s heavy panting into something elegant and worthy of a symphony hall, sounds that deserved to reverberate off the walls designed for music, tuning his body to make all the sounds Will wanted to hear; Will bucked his hips up roughly to create more friction against his cock and Hannibal paused long enough to use his free arm to hook up under Will’s knee. Will howled out against Hannibal’s palm and his eyes slammed shut as the other man managed to make contact with his prostate. God, why hadn’t he tried this sooner? Hannibal buried his face against Will’s neck, moaning as he manipulated Will into a position that would be—had he not been high on endorphins—completely uncomfortable. He brought the leg still around Hannibal’s waist up higher, earning a satisfied noise from the other man. Will felt like the instrument to be played, no longer the conductor and writhed beneath Hannibal as his mind shifted along with the new sensations. He felt vulnerable and at Hannibal’s complete mercy—which was so thrilling—and he forced his eyes open to look at the other man, needing the grounding of contact. Hannibal’s hair had fallen from its carefully coiffed position, hanging across his eyes and Will used a hand to feverishly push it back, wanting to look into a killer’s eyes. Somewhere in the back of his mind, panic formed at the thought he was allowing himself to associate their intimacy with the work of a serial killer, but he was already in the highs of the mindset. Will’s hands came up to Hannibal’s shoulders, moving across the broad muscles, feeling their strength and restraint, and imagined that Hannibal’s smile was really more feral than it already was. He drew a finger back and forth across the small of Hannibal’s back, picturing his hand holding a bow to draw across exposed vocal cords, timing each movement with the way the other man thrust.

'It’s a feedback loop,’ he thought to himself as he keened against’s Hannibal’s palm. ‘I’m seeing everything the killer is seeing because I’m imagining myself as the victim because Hannibal’s the killer in this scenario and I can watch him.’ Yes, Hannibal was perfect for this line of thought because all Will could experience at the moment was the brute force Hannibal’s body could create and he shut his eyes again. He moaned out, shifting his hips at a different angle so that he could suffer this exquisite death longer, to see the Chesapeake Ripper in a completely different way, and yet in the most familiar way he’d ever known. Behind his eyelids, the silver pendulum swung back and forth and he was the victim of the Chesapeake Ripper—no! He was the one the Chesapeake Ripper wanted. The killer still looked like Hannibal and he didn’t allow himself to get upset over that—it was unfortunate, yes, but he’d never tried his empathy like this before and it was to be expected there would be faults in this new system.

‘My love is triggered out of jealousy, out of perceived fear of loss. I can’t keep my eyes on you at all time, but I try. I am possessive of you. You belong to me and with me,’ he thought, touching the Chesapeake Ripper’s face tenderly.

He watched a plume of bow resin puff out of Hannibal’s lips, felt the captivating sensation of a bow being drawn slowly over his throat, the sensual slide over his adam’s apple as he swallowed; the Chesapeake Ripper gave him a mischievous smile and Will blushed, not nearly ashamed enough to be appropriate at how appealing this was to him.

‘Did you like what I made you? I wanted to get a decent sound out of him and I knew you’d get the joke. We have a dark sense of humour, you and I. I love the sounds you make. You make me feel
alive. This can be an inside joke for the two of us and we’ll laugh together while others don’t understand it, don’t see the layers beneath it.’

He shivered at the understanding that the Chesapeake Ripper found all of this amusing, arching under his touch, wanting to push the killer’s mindset away, but it meshed so well with lust and love and he just couldn’t.

’Bite me!’ he pleaded to the Chesapeake Ripper who bore his lover’s face.

Hannibal became still above him and Will’s eyes snapped open, realising that he’d said it aloud, audibly enough that he’d heard it despite the fact his mouth was covered by Hannibal’s palm; the hand was removed and Will panted, turning his head to the side so that he didn’t have to make eye contact with the man above him, horrified at what Hannibal must know—’He knows that I’m thinking about killing people while we’re fucking,’—but Hannibal’s hand returned to his face, turning him back to look at him.

“Ask again and I will.” Hannibal’s eyes were kind.

“Please bite me,” he whispered and Hannibal smiled, caressing a thumb against his jaw before the palm as pressed to his lips again.

“Yes, Will.”

He felt as though he was being physically devoured. Hard bites on the straining muscles of his shoulders. Small pinching bites on his chest, sucking bites on his neck, tugging bites on his lips, and soft clenches of teeth on his jaw. The biting along his shoulders became heavier until Will was crying out against the hand Hannibal was using to cover his mouth. Oh god, it was like drowning—his lungs burned, his body was aching, his arms thrashing against the bed as he gripped the sheets helplessly—and all he could think of was that he wanted livid marks when this was all done. A way to remember that—for at least some time—he had been wanted.

And then suddenly the hand came off his mouth and Hannibal was kissing him, thrusting deep and hard still. The hand that had been over Will’s mouth had reached between their bodies to curl around him. Will realised that the words, ‘I love you’, were being repeated over and over against his lips and with that, he came loudly. Hannibal released Will’s leg from the splay he’d held him in and tried to catch his breath as he watched the other man bring his fingers up to his mouth, licking off Will’s semen.

“I love you,” he breathed earnestly, his body trembling still and stole a quick kiss, tasting himself.

“Do you?” Hannibal whispered.

“I love you, I—I love you,” he swore, his fingers clutching at Hannibal’s face.

Hannibal gave him the most breathtakingly beautiful smile—Will could feel his movements becoming less controlled—and with that, Hannibal came inside of him. He closed his eyes, holding Hannibal close to him as he allowed the sensory overload to come crashing down upon him.

They lie together like that for almost a minute, Will stroking Hannibal’s sweat damp hair and Hannibal murmuring something into his neck that sounded Lithuanian. Empathy always present, Will had a fairly good idea the meaning behind the words.

“I…” He started to say ‘I love you’, but was suddenly self-conscious, deciding to joke instead. “I didn’t make you forget English, did I?”
“Don’t flatter yourself, William.” Hannibal’s voice sounded content and relaxed. “I was…telling you how much you mean to me.”

“I…” Will hesitated a second time and Hannibal lifted his head, forcing eye contact.

“When you are with me, you are safe to say anything.”

“I love you.” Will turned his face away, finding the eye contact to be too much. “I…I really…do.”

“I’m glad my feelings for you are returned. I have…loved you for a long time.”

Will smiled but felt confused. “Have you?”

“Yes.” The warmth and weight of Hannibal’s body pulled away and Will made a small sound of protest. “Let us shower. We shall sleep better if we do.”

The shower was (mercifully) brief and Hannibal’s hands were respectful enough of Will’s space that he didn’t feel crowded in the small area, though he did indulge in a few kisses along Hannibal’s shoulders and neck, which the other man returned with equal affection. And when he stood at the mirror to brush his teeth, he found himself staring at the bite marks across his shoulders, all threatening bruises and tooth imprints that formed halos on his pale skin. Hannibal had long, angry looking red scratch marks on his back that had half welted and Will insisted on disinfecting them with antiseptic, apologising until the other man shushed him, murmuring how he ‘wanted them’.

Will attempted to help Hannibal with the quilt they’d made a mess of, but Hannibal smiled and simply put on his dressing gown, folding the quilt up and carrying it out of the room. Will was thoroughly exhausted by now and opened the window on the far side of the room to get fresh, cool air circulating; crawling under the top sheet, he was asleep long before Hannibal ever returned.

*****

Breakfast the morning following was held over at the main house, a grand affair that Hannibal, Abigail, and various staff baked and cooked for the over thirty members of the family that had spent the night on the compound. Will arrived a bit late and completely famished. While he was not a physically affectionate man outside of the bedroom (and even then he’d alway felt restrained because he didn’t want to risk embarrassing himself), he had wished to kiss Hannibal this morning instead of waking to an empty bed and a neatly written note indicating where he was to join the other man. He did manage to get close to him in the crowded kitchen and murmur a good morning and an offer to help with the food, but was quickly ushered to the table where he found a place marker next to the head of the table with his name on it. He was very relieved to be seated beside Hannibal, though still anxious that he might have to talk to people.

Various members of the Kennedy clan filtered into dining room and for the most part he was given ‘hellos’ and ‘good mornings’, but generally left alone. He hadn’t seen his dogs yet and the mystery to their location was answered when one of the men he’d been introduced to the night before (Thomas?) commented that the kids that were on the compound had held a large slumber party in Guest House Two and the dogs had been the highlight of the night; Thomas had laughed and clapped Will on the back for bringing the best ‘distractions’ on the property. He smiled weakly, unsure what to say; he was relieved every dog was receiving plenty of attention, but he still kept his fingers crossed that no one would get bit.

Soon enough, Hannibal came to the head of the table, Abigail seating herself across from Will, and as the cook staff brought out platters of food, he warned that nothing was vegetarian, which earned a gale of laughter. Will was immediately given the impression that the only family members that were
there to attend the meal were already well aware of the stipulations and the other people on the
compound had to find their own breakfast. Will’s mouth watered as a particularly extravagant platter
of fragrant meats was set between himself and Abigail and when his eyes met hers, she was smiling.
He smiled back and Hannibal sat down, announcing he would say grace. Everyone joined hands and
Hannibal gave a particularly eloquent but brief prayer, his thumb stroking a small and secret circle on
Will’s knuckles. Finally he indicated that the meal had begun with an accented,

“Bon appétit.”

and everyone began serving themselves; forks immediately began scraping and clinking against the
plates, everyone speaking of how they looked forward to Hannibal’s cooking each time they visited.
Hannibal served him without asking, holding a conversation with Caroline Kennedy as he stacked
pastries and bacon on Will’s plate. Will continued to mumble ‘thanks’ to Hannibal until his plate was
filled with food, all of it arranged neatly. Hannibal’s eyes met his and Will knew he could easily sit
through a thousand crowded gatherings so long as he was with Hannibal.

Abigail was conversing with a few of the other teenagers at the table, while Jack was holding court
with a few Shrivers; Will sat quietly, watching. No one seemed to question his presence at the table
despite the fact he wasn’t talking and for a moment, he tried to imagine himself as a member of this
large, loving family. It was impossible. He’d only ever had his dad (and that was only if he was
sober) and could only imagine how anxious he would have been as a child if he’d had to face
holidays here. It was completely different than anything he was accustomed to and he wondered if
the ever polite, completely charming Lecter had felt out of place amongst this family who so
desperately wanted to make him happy as they did with everyone else.

A toast was eventually raised to Hannibal and Will lifted his champagne flute of orange juice (he’d
turned down a mimosa) as some wished for Hannibal’s good fortune, and for his continued good
ratings among the nation, while others gave thanks for his generosity and kind heart, and lastly for
his dedication to family. Hannibal graciously nodded, looking quite humbled and under the table
held Will’s hand.

*****

“Where are you going?” Will asked Hannibal curiously a few hours after lunch. They’d finished a
quick briefing with Jack in the main house’s wine cellar and Will had lingered at a distance as
Hannibal had a quick talk with a few of his relatives in the kitchen.

“I am off to collect my cousin Robert’s daughter, Rosemary. It seems she has wandered off.” He
made his way out the open back door, Will following after him.

“What does she look like?” Will was always welcome to track.

Hannibal smiled as Will fell in time with him. “She is four and I was told she was wearing green
shorts and a blue shirt.”

There was activity all about the compound—the tennis courts were teaming with various adults
laughing and trying to hold a volley ball game, children were cartwheeling and playing tag on the
back lawn and by the beach was a group of teenagers were playing frisbee with Winston and Joh.
Will shaded his eyes and looked out to the northeast and spotted a small figure by the wall of hedges
between the Vice President’s and Hannibal’s summer properties. “Oh, there she is.”

They walked together to the little girl and Hannibal greeted her first. “Hello.”

She didn’t look up, focused on the small dog she had on a leash. “Hi.”
“That’s Dixie,” Will offered as the dog came over to him, smelling at his pant leg.

The child smiled. “I’m walking her.”

“She likes going on walks.”

“She’s my best friend,” the little girl announced, squatting down to pet the dog on the head.

It seemed the child’s parents had spotted them and as Hannibal engaged her in a conversation about the little dog, they came over to collect her.

“Rosy! What are you doing out here?” her mother asked, laughing slightly.

“Hannibal!” The President’s cousin nodded to Will. “Hello, Will!”

“Hello. Are the three of you headed home?” Hannibal asked politely.

“Yes, California beckons.”

“Rosy, we need to go,” her mother reminded.

“I’m taking Dixie for a walk,” the little girl insisted.

“I know, but it’s time to go.”

“Your dog?” the cousin asked.

“Yeah,” Will mumbled. Everyone knew they were his dogs. Will Graham, the asshole who brought along seven dogs on the President’s vacation.

“Oh, we’d just love a dog like her. Uncle Teddy used to have the loveliest puppies. We’ve wanted to get her a dog for so long, but we were just so worried about getting one that didn’t like small children. She’s going to hate leaving Dixie behind. All she’s done since she’s gotten here is walk her around on that leash.”

The little girl took advantage of her parents’ distraction and proceeded to lead the dog over to flowers around the flag post; he could feel the keen ache of her being told she was going to have to leave her new companion behind, the hint of abandonment tasting like bile.

“Will rescues and rehabilitates his dogs.” Hannibal’s hand came to rest on Will’s shoulder, looking every bit an innocent and friendly gesture.

“I, uh…” Will found himself swallowing hard and avoiding eye contact. His voice sounded like a mumble. “If…if you really want her…”

“No, we couldn’t.” It was said halfheartedly.

“I mean, it’s just that…” He couldn’t seem to form the words he wanted to say, feeling them in a well at the back of his brain.

“Will would be honoured for you to have Dixie,” Hannibal finished for him.

“Are you sure?” It was asked in the hesitant tone that suggested they wanted to have him insist upon them adopting the dog.

“They’re supposed to go to new homes.” Standing so close to Hannibal, Will tried to draw upon him
as a source of inner strength. “It’ll…it’ll be good for her to be around a kid.”

Mrs Shiver’s face lit up as expected, her hands clapping together. “Oh, thank you so much.”

“Thanks, Will,” Hannibal’s cousin agreed, beaming at him as all politicians did when they got their way. “She’s going to be so excited.”

“I’ll go get her things,” Will announced in his abrupt and awkward way.

“I shall come with you.” Hannibal kept up with him and his long strides. “It was very generous of you to offer for them to take Dixie.” Will said nothing and Hannibal remained quiet until they reached Silver House. As Will entered the mudroom that the dog’s belongings had been stored in, the older man tried to speak to him again. “Are you all right, Will?”

“It’s uh…” He wasn’t sure what he wanted to say—everything was so conflicted in his mind. Of course the goal was always to adopt the strays out whenever possible, but it didn’t make it less traumatic to part with any of them. The underlying fear of not being able to protect the animals he invested so much time to protect and heal was ever present. It felt similar to his fear of being unable to protect Abigail.

“They are your family,” Hannibal said softly, his hand coming to cover Will’s.

“Yeah. Yes,” he corrected. “I’m…she’ll be going to a good home?”

Will hadn’t meant to make it a question, but he couldn’t help turning to Hannibal for reassurance.

“They will give her a very good home, Will. You have made a good choice of family to send her with.”

“Dixie’s never been on a plane,” Will acknowledged, feeling guilt over how she’d most likely react at the new experience.

Hannibal’s hand reassuringly stroked his arm and in the back of his mind, Will acknowledged that Hannibal had an excellent bedside manner. “She’ll be fine. Would you like me to have the local veterinary clinic give her a sedative before she boards?”

“Yeah, that might be good.” He pulled away from the other man’s touch. “I’m sorry. Do we have any plastic bags? I need to pack her things.”

Hannibal seemed to take the hint and took a step towards the door. “Let me check in the kitchen.”

Will managed to compose himself by the time Hannibal returned with a paper bag, which he packed a few of the communal dog toys in, even though he knew the Schrivers would certainly be buying her plenty of new toys and things for their home in California. Stuffing Dixie’s bed into the carrier, he finally concluded that he couldn’t delay the inevitable; Dixie would be going somewhere where she’d have a family that would take care of her, where she could spend time with a little girl who loved her. Will should be happy.

They met at the Shriver’s rental and as Hannibal said his goodbyes to his family, Will spoke quietly to the little girl about how he hoped she would have lots of fun with the small dog. She told him about her big backyard and that she was going to let Dixie sleep in her bed, before her parents came over to buckle her into her car seat. He waved goodbye to Dixie and the four year old as they drove away, Hannibal by his side. Finally he turned around to look out at the sea.

Hannibal tilted his head, studying Will’s face. “Will?”
He gave a weak smile to the other man. “I’m fine. I think… I think I just need to walk around a bit. Get my thoughts focused.”

Hannibal’s hand gently squeezed his shoulder. “Take your time. This is a big adjustment.”

Will nodded and unsure what else he could possibly say, turned around and wandered off to the docks.

*****

On the third evening of being at the Kennedy Compound, Hannibal came to stand at Will’s side, tipping his head minutely in the direction of the ocean. “Come with me.”

There was to be a large barbecue that Jack and a few of the Secret Service agents were throwing on the back lawn and Will had been hiding on the outskirts of the gathering, feigning interest in his BlackBerry and iced tea to avoid conversation. They walked down to the docks and boathouse in silence. Will had been interested in the boats owned by the political family, but hadn’t wanted to bother Hannibal with requests to see them. And the word ‘boathouse’ was uncomfortable for him anyway—he could only imagine how the other man felt.

Hannibal gestured to a well maintained vessel at the end of the dock, closest to the deeper waters of the Atlantic. “This was formerly my uncle’s but he gave it to me upon my acceptance into John Hopkins.”

“The Honey Bee,” Will said, reading the elegantly painted script on the back of the boat.

Hannibal smiled fondly as his eyes looked over the name “For my cousin.”

Will felt an ugly feeling course through him that was nearly jealousy, but was closer to discomfort. The more he knew of Bedelia Du Maurier, the more his skin crawled. She was an oil spill in an arctic ocean, slowly spreading because no one was aware she was there.

“You two really were close, weren’t you?” He hoped he sounded casual.

Hannibal’s eyes drifted over to him. “We still are.”

“Only because it’s convenient,” Will observed, which caused the other man to smile.

“I like to think she and I still have something left of our friendship when were much younger. She knew how to keep a secret.” Hannibal seemed to study his face for a moment and then added, “When we first met, she laughed in my face and told me that everyone viewed me as something fragile. She told me that I was not a teacup. She had no mercy.”

“She still doesn’t,” Will said quietly.

“I would love to know all your thoughts about my cousin. To see if we are looking at the same person.”

Will didn’t want to promise anything, because as he’d told Hannibal once before, his thoughts weren’t often tasty; he took the opportunity to steer the conversation in another direction. “You had a lot of secrets to keep when you were a kid?”

“I still do.”

“You can trust me with your secrets,” Will said quietly.
“I know.” Hannibal’s fingers brushed against Will’s briefly and they shared a smile. Pausing in at the end of the dock, Hannibal turned to him. “Which one is your favourite?”

Will studied the boats, turning to look at the small catboats and sloops that were secured to different posts. He didn’t allow himself to get his hopes up that he might be allowed to sail one of them.

“This one. Small. Handmade.” He indicated to a simple, but beautiful gaff sloop with lowered sail. “A lot of care went into the craftsmanship.”

“You have exquisite taste.” The other man’s smile took a slightly smug edge. “As do I, apparently.” Hannibal handed over a folded piece of paper and Will took it hesitantly. “What is this?”

Hannibal smiled at him as Will looked back down at the paper. “I made an educated guess as to which you would like the best and purchased it for you.”

It was a title of ownership.

“You what?” Will choked out.

“It’s yours, Will.”

Will took a step closer to the boat. “Why?”

“Because I love you.” Hannibal said the words so simply as though he was stating that the sky was blue—it was a fact and nothing more.

Will’s heart was pounding in his chest. “I don’t…I don’t know what to say.”

“I shall leave you some time to inspect the boat. I believe Jack is starting the barbecue.” Hannibal glanced back towards the main house.

“Hannibal.” There was a knot in Will’s throat.

Hannibal shifted forward; to anyone else, it would look as though their conversation was still casual, but Will knew that this was as close as they could get together out in the open. “You do not need to say the words, Will. I already know.”

Their eye contact was too much and too easy. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome.” Hannibal leaned away, still staring into his eyes. “I shall see you back at the house, Will.”

Will nodded, unable to speak and looked back down at the title of ownership in his hands. Sure enough, typed out was his name. He kept reading it over and over, unable to look away lest it was all a dream that would dissolve away. By the time he managed to lift his eyes from the paper, Hannibal was long gone. The catboat was humble, but in the eyes of anyone with an appreciation for sailing, it was a work of art. Will couldn’t remember ever seeing a boat so beautiful. It looked like something that belonged in a painting.

Finally, after reaching out to touch the side of the boat, he decided it was time to get back to the rest of the guests so no one was sent looking for him. Beverly lingered at the edge of the docks, watching a boat out on the ocean with her binoculars before seemingly determining it not a threat. He walked past the agent, mind a million places at once.

“So what’s up?” she asked as she walked beside him back to the main house.
“What do you mean?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You okay? Your hands are shaking.”

Will quickly clenched his hands into fists and quietly announced. “He bought me a boat.”

“Really?”

Will let out a strangled sounding laugh because he still couldn’t believe it. “He bought me a goddamn boat.”

“He’s a keeper.” Beverly had a large grin on her face. “Damn, no one’s ever bought me a boat.” Her expression softened and she looked him over. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“The real question is, why does he still like me?”

Beverly smirked loudly. “No, the real question is, how do the two of you manage such restraint in the work place? We never catch you on camera doing anything. If it was me, I’d be getting it on that desk, nonstop.”

Will grimaced, embarrassed even though he did find it slightly funny. “Please stay away from that desk.”

She belted out a laugh, nudging him with her elbow and he tried not to look at her as his cheeks burned.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Alana fanned herself with a memo pad from Bedelia’s desk, unbuttoning the top button of her blouse; the air conditioning in the White House had been faulty over the past two days, leaving many of the rooms sweltering when there wasn’t a few good fans available. She and Bedelia had barricaded themselves in the Vice President’s office to stay cool, drinking the cool pitchers of water the ushers brought in by the gallon. August should have boasted more than stagnant air in the city and a farm bill that was failing to garner any support amongst either the Dems or GOP; Hannibal and Bedelia had proposed a radical overhaul that was beneficial to the nation’s farmers and food producers, but many senators, congressional members, and governors had been receiving kickbacks for years from various interest groups to keep the soon to expire system in place. However, there were various meetings planned between the Vice President and key players that could get the bill passed through.

One of the younger interns, a Miss Jenn Bianco, sauntered into the office with formalities from the Secretary of Agriculture, which Bedelia accepted wordlessly.

“If you need anything else, let me know.” The young woman flipped her hair over her shoulder.

Bedelia’s lips curled slightly. “I shall.”

Bianco gave Bedelia a look that could only be described as hungry. Alana pretended she didn’t see it as she sipped on her water; her boss had a definite animal magnetism that seemed irresistible once she focused in on someone. Alana had seen pages and interns come and go, all caught in the politician’s orbit until she carefully sent them on their way, all with excellent letters of recommendation and occasionally with better jobs lined up. Bedelia wasn’t buying silence—she was building success around her for later use.

When Alana had first started working for Bedelia, she’d be uncomfortable by the realisation that her boss had affairs with practically anyone that came across her path; there was of course the stigma that women shouldn’t ‘sleep around’, as well as the stereotype that all politicians fucked their young and impressionable interns. But no one ever parted from Bedelia’s hold upset and the connexions made rivaled any other networking in Washington DC, which meant Bedelia’s office could make calls practically anywhere in the country and people gladly assisted. It was manipulation on a master level and Alana suspected that it was the reason Bedelia had risen through the ranks so quickly. Granted, Bedelia wasn’t just a pretty face that slept her way to the top—she had a mind sharper than almost anyone Alana had met and she took her duties to her constituents very seriously, never backing down until she got what she wanted. Alana was willing to overlook the tactics her boss used because the results were so damn good.

Once the intern shut the door behind her, Bedelia’s eyes slid over to hers. “It would seem Miss Bianco is looking to replace you.”

Alana smiled at her boss. “Do I have anything to worry about?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.” Bedelia returned the smile, no doubt amused. “Hannibal has been keeping me apprised of his vacation and I’ve assured him that everything is running smoothly in his absence.”

“I hope he’s enjoying his holiday. God knows how much he needs one.” Alana poured more water into Bedelia’s glass.
“Why is that?” Bedelia looked at her in curiosity and Alana was quick to clarify what she meant.

“Oh, well, because of all the pressure he’s been under.”

Bedelia watched her, bringing her glass of water to her lips. Alana wondered if she had said something wrong, even though she had been frank about Hannibal to her employer before. The elegant woman didn’t seem upset however and after they watched one another for a moment, Bedelia lowered her glass back to the desk.

“Have you spoken with Mr Graham lately? Does he seem to be content?”

Alana’s brow furrowed, an unease building in her stomach.

“Bedelia, you…have been asking about Will a lot recently. Is, um, is everything okay? Are you worried about him being around Hannibal?”

Alana was protective of anyone she considered a friend and both men were no exception. She had her concerns about the two of them together—less about safety, but about the Chesapeake Ripper cases and what that was doing to the two of them. The men’s hobby was a well known secret among the upper echelon of White House employees and to be honest, it creeped her out. Neither man needed to be worrying about what serial killers were up to. They should be enjoying the fruits of an accomplished administration.

Bedelia looked away just long enough for Alana to know something was on her mind larger than just Will’s wellbeing. “Alana, you are my most trusted confidant. I can tell you anything and I know you will say nothing about it.”

Alana sat down on the edge of the desk, wanting to give her full attention to the other woman. “Of course. You can tell me anything.”

Bedelia tapped a carefully manicured nail against her glass. “It would seem that Hannibal has become close to Mr Graham…a very unique friendship between them.”

Alana nodded. There was no doubt to her that both men had a strange ease when they were around one another. “Hannibal has never had many close friends in his inner circle. Sometimes even I wonder where I stand with him.”

“It would seem that Mr Graham has had the same problem with friendship as my dear cousin. Never quite able to open up. But then they found each other.”

Alana was trying to seek out the greater meaning to what the other woman was saying, confused with what she was supposed to understand. “Do you think it’s affecting Hannibal’s ability to work. Or Will’s?”

“What I worry about is the possibility of what is going on between them might affect his reelection.”

The words took a second to process and Alana felt her stomach drop. “Wait.”

“Yes.” Bedelia raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry. I thought you were more aware of the situation.”

Alana felt as though she needed to catch her breath. “How long? How long have they…”

“I believe they have been in flagrante delicto since May. Perhaps June. Their love is still young.”

“Do you think it’s love?” Alana hadn’t meant to make her voice sound so skeptical.
“I’m certain of it.”

So the past few months she’d been carefully avoiding Will, not wanting him to think that she wanted anything more than friendship (and even then she’d been hesitant with offering even that), he’d been secretly forming a relationship with the most powerful man in the nation. She doubted it was anything like what Bedelia did to her subordinates—Hannibal gained absolutely nothing from wielding his control over another person. She wondered who had made the first move. Ever hesitant Will with his awkward flirting? Prim and careful Hannibal who never imposed on anyone? What did they see in one another? Will wasn’t someone impressed by operas or three thousand dollar suits. Hannibal wasn’t someone who wanted a life isolated from the metropolitan. It was such an odd romance—even still she had a hard time seeing it as such. *Romance.* No doubt Hannibal could woo anyone into his arms, but was it romance? Did Hannibal enjoy Will’s awkwardly worded advances? Did Will stay late for glasses of wine as she used to many years ago?

She had to stop thinking about the details.

“I…” An uncomfortable laugh left her lips. “I never thought Hannibal would ever fall in love. Seems weird to say it out loud,” Alana admitted; she’d always been deeply fond of the man, and while she had never wanted a romantic relationship with anyone, she always imagined he would definitely be the exception to the rule. Like his cousin, he had something that made everyone gravitate towards him, seeking his attention solely and selfishly. “I have noticed he’s…”

“Happier,” Bedelia supplied.

“Yes. He is…happier.”

“You have reservations on their union.”

“I consider myself friends to both of them. And honestly…” She lowered her gaze to her glass, studying melting ice cubes as she processed her thoughts. “I just don’t see what there could be between them.”

“Opposites attract,” Bedelia suggested.

Alana shook her head. “They’re not opposites. They’re just…” she trailed off once more and then looked up. “Hannibal and Will are so married to their work. How can there be room for anything else between them?”

“They’re exploring the possibility of something more, perhaps.”

It was quiet between the two of them. She took another drink of water, not noticing how Bedelia was watching her in concealed amusement.

“To love and happiness,” she finally said, raising her glass. She couldn’t believe she was being so selfish as to not accept their good fortune immediately.

Bedelia looked appeased and raised her glass as well.

*****

“What are you going to name it?” Abigail asked curiously as she ate her muesli and looked over the title of ownership for the gaff sloop out on the Kennedy docks.

It was their first breakfast together—just the three of them—since arriving at the compound and Will was happy to have the normalcy and privacy returned to their lives, not stopping to think about how
this had become normal to him. The dogs had all but abandoned him for the rest of compound and
Will saw them on occasion, which was fairly distressing because he felt so responsible for them,
possessive…they were his family, after all.

Hannibal was adding extra eggs on Abigail’s plate and topping off Will’s orange juice, his own
breakfast forgotten as he tended to them and Will actually remembered to murmur ‘thank you’.

“The Filfolet,” Will said and then turned to the other man. “Hannibal, thank you so much. It means
more to me, than…than what I can put into words.”

“It was my pleasure, Will,” Hannibal said humbly as he straightened the pepper mill on the table.

“I wish I could do something for you,” he admitted. It was something that had been rubbing a
rawness against Will’s nerves.

“You needn’t. Love is about giving gifts, not returning favours.”

“I love you,” Will blurted out. “Not just because of the boat.”

“I know. I love you.” Hannibal leaned down and pressed his lips gently against Will’s cheek.

Abigail was smiling, pretending not to watch them and he turned his attention back to his food as
Hannibal walked back to the stove.

“What does Fifolet mean?” she asked.

“It’s a Cajan myth,” he explained, cutting into the extra sausage links Hannibal had added to his
plate. “A fifolet is a light that floats over sunken treasure in the swamp.”

“Oh, that’s cool. Have you ever seen one?” She looked very curious at the thought of the
supernatural.

Will smiled and shook his head, returning his attention to his plate; Hannibal came to sit at the table
finally and began to eat. Will passed him the plate of toast, to which the other man nodded his
appreciation. It was possibly the most domestic thing he’d ever had the pleasure of enjoying.

“What is the plan for the day, Daddy?” Abigail asked as she began to finish off the last of her
breakfast.

Hannibal stirred sugar into his coffee. “Will is going to take us sailing, my love.”

“Oh?” she turned to look at him hopefully.

“I…” Will was caught off guard, but honestly, it was better than his plan of reading in the garden
until lunchtime. “Yes, the three of us are going to go sailing.”

“Like a family.” Abigail smiled at him.

“Yes,” he agreed.

They spent the morning sailing around Nantucket in the new boat, Will the proud captain of the
Fifolet; Hannibal brought along lunch of cold chicken salad sandwiches and Abigail made sun tea in
a half gallon canning jar that she set on the deck of the sloop. Will thought the boat was better than
anything he could have dreamt of and when Hannibal told him that he’d have someone hired to paint
the new name of the vessel on the back, he felt as though his grin might split his face in half. Even
the boats circling at some distance, photographers aboard trying to get pictures of the President out at
sea couldn’t dampen his mood.

*****

On the second day, Will wondered if he was being rude by not give Hannibal a chance to sail the new boat, so he allowed him to commandeer the vessel off the dock. Out on open water and away from others sailing, the three settled comfortably as though this was all they’d ever done together. Will leaned back against the cabin on the boat, bracing one foot against the railings as the boat took the waves gracefully, salt water spraying his face. He shaded his eyes with a hand and almost regretted not having sunglasses, but he was simply too content to be on the boat to care.

Hannibal had removed his shirt, tanning in the most attractive way under the August sun, a cigarette in his mouth as the wind disheveled his hair; Will couldn’t say he looked ‘casual’, as he still had a very regal and commanding air about him, but he was heavily reminded of the boat captains at the docks when he was growing up. And god, he looked so handsome in Nantucket Reds.

Abigail sat on the roof of the cabin; much like Will, she mostly sunburned, but unlike Will, who was wearing a loose long sleeved button up over his t-shirt, she was dressed every inch New England prep, her bare arms and legs slathered in sunscreen and her head covered by a very large brimmed hat. She had taken control of the conversation, laughing about a rap song that referenced Hannibal’s presidency, playing it for them from her phone—most of it was lost over the sound of the waves, but it made Hannibal smile at the mention of the ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’ nickname he’d been called the year previous by the opposition’s supporters. Will had always found the joke ridiculous and it had only been exacerbated when Hannibal’s supporters had adopted the moniker for their candidate, claiming that ‘my president can eat yours’ (god, he’d seen an entire sea of posters proclaiming that one in Las Vegas) as well as ‘Cannibals & Kennedys 2012’ and ‘Dems for the Cannibal’. Will had seen enough ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’ shirts and ‘Cannibal Lecter’ bumper stickers to last a lifetime. And with the knowledge of what had happened to his little sister, Will found the matter nauseating. But oddly enough the President always seemed amused by the nickname and as Abigail volleyed a myriad of jokes about the matter, she was tying a length of rope into a braided loop.

Finally it was revealed that she’d been making a turks head knot bracelet and gestured for him to hold out his arm to her; Abigail slipped the bracelet over his hand and said sternly,

“You have to wear it the whole summer.”

He touched the rough cordage. “I will.”

“Good.”

“Are we ready for a picnic?” Hannibal asked and Will was embarrassed at how loudly his stomach growled, causing the other man to smile as he dropped the boat’s anchor. “I shall take that as a yes.”

“Here’s yours, Daddy.” Abigail reached out across the cabin’s roof to Hannibal.

“Thank you, Abigail.” Hannibal slipped the bracelet over his right hand before leaning down to the boat’s small cabin.

Abigail pulled out two more lengths of the rope from her shirt’s pocket and handed one to Will. “And I’m going to teach you how to make one for me.”

“I’m not going to be very—“ he started.

“Yes, you will. You just have to be patient.”
Hannibal’s voice was slightly muffled from the cabin. “Don’t interrupt your father, Abigail.”

“Sorry,” she said gently, touching Will’s wrist.

Will’s heart was in his throat as he felt the acknowledgment that he was truly recognised as theirs. “It’s okay.”

She slid off the top of the cabin to sit in front of him. “You’ll do fine. It takes a bit of practice, but it’s easy.” She took the second length of rope and began to loop it, motioning for him to copy what she was doing. “I’m going to make one for Barney. He’s been so good to all of us.”

*****

The next morning the only headline regarding their boating was the fact that Hannibal was smoking, disappointment resonating in every word. Will felt his anxiety rise at the photo of the three of them sailing, wondering if it was obvious to anyone else that they were more than just ‘President Lecter and First Lady Abigail, accompanied by the President’s assistant’.

Hannibal had given the article a small quirk of his lips before turning his attention back to their breakfast; Will did pause to wonder what the country would do if they learned their president was in a relationship with another man, but Hannibal kissed him on the lips and asked him to set out the carafe of orange juice on the table, banishing all worries.

*****

Will was quite happy to see Alana when she arrived with the Vice President on day eight of the holiday in Hyannis Port. She was busy removing luggage from the back of the Secret Service escort vehicle everything had been packed in when he came around the side front of the Vice President’s summer home, the gravel of the driveway crunching under his shoes.

“Alana, hi,” he called out and she turned.

Will smiled and held his hands out to take some of the luggage she had stacked to be carried inside.

“Hey, Will. How are you?”

Her smile was odd, and the look she was giving him could only mean one thing. He found his glasses in his shirt pocket and slipped them on.

“I’m fine.” He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “So the Vice President told you.”

“Bit of a surprise. But good. Good. I’m glad you’re happy. And that Hannibal is, too.” She gave a laugh without much humour. “I’ll be honest—I didn’t see this coming.”

“I, uh…it was definitely not planned for,” he admitted.

“But you’re happy?”

“Yeah,” he assured her.

“Good.” She attempted to keep her tone casual. “What about Abigail?”

“She’s happy with the arrangement.”

Alana looked noticeably relieved. “Good, that’s great. She’s had so much to deal with… I wouldn’t want her to feel pushed aside or that she needed to compete with you for attention.”
“No, she’s..” Will smiled. “She’s okay.”

“I’ve got to get in—never truly on vacation,” she said with a laugh and grabbed two suitcases, walking towards the open front door of the summer home.

Will kept his mouth shut, because Hannibal had made it abundantly clear anytime that he’d tried to assist with something that he was to sit back and relax. He lifted the rest of the suitcases and followed after her.

Mind never at rest, he began to process her reaction; she liked Hannibal—perhaps not in a romantic capacity, but certainly enough to care about him—she’d known him for many years now and it was only natural that any interloper in the politician’s life would be judged with the utmost scrutiny. With her knowledge of Will and with Hannibal’s history, she had much to worry about. How had she reacted when Abigail was introduced in Hannibal’s life, for that matter? Will began to wonder if she’d talk to Hannibal about their relationship—of course she would, she’d have things she’d want to say—and he hoped that he wouldn’t be present for it. He didn’t want to know what either said when he wasn’t present.

His thoughts were cut short as someone came bounding through the front door of the house and out to him. It was Abigail dressed in a tennis outfit, a racquet in one hand and water bottle in the other. Her long hair had been pulled back in a sporty ponytail and a bright yellow scarf had been tied careful over the scar that had gained her such notoriety.

“Will, Aunt Bee and I are going to go play tennis. Want to watch?”

“Alana knows,” he murmured as they walked together.

“Aunt Bee told her?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

Abigail looked contemplative for a moment, then nodded. “Are you upset? That she knows?”

“No.” “No, she’d find out at some point. Better now than…” he trailed off.

“The wedding?” she teased.

Will gave a laugh that came out as a snort. Yes, it was probably best that Alana not have been kept in the dark, though he would have been much happier to be the one to tell her.

Seemingly satisfied that she’d put a smile on his face, Abigail asked him again, “So do you want to watch me play?”

He didn’t particularly want to, especially considering Alana would be there, but he wanted to be there whenever Abigail needed him, so he forced enthusiasm. “I’d like that. Just let me get this to your aunt’s house and I’ll meet you out at the courts.”

She beamed at him, thumping her racquet against the heel of her tennis shoes. “‘Kay. Don’t take too long.”

*****

As had been tradition since their ninth year alive, Hannibal had celebrated his birthday jointly with Bedelia during the summer reunions on the compound. He’d never had strong feelings towards celebrating his birthday, but his cousin revealed in the attention so eagerly given by everyone
present. And this year, it had gone from overdone party to absolute pageantry. The dining room had been decorated in patriotic bunting and colourful streamers, balloons covering the ceiling, and there had been party hats and small bags of tourist party favours one of the cousins had purchased in town. Bedelia and he drew the line at party hats. They were turning forty-eight, for heaven’s sake.

The cake was large and smelt homemade, most likely a box mix, and the words ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY H & B’ had been iced across the white frosting in a bright blue. The cheap candles burned wicks that emitted a sharp odour that stung his nose and he looked for his daughter, needing to her to open a window or reposition one of the fans in the room to get fresh air to him, but he couldn’t make eye contact with her long enough to hint that he wasn’t happy—various cousins kept getting between them and he was forced to endure.

Hannibal found blowing out the candles juvenile and the fact that the White House Press corp would be capturing the moment (Bedelia demanded it) was insult to injury, but he knew that if he caused any kind of resistance to what had been done for almost forty years without interruption, it would upset the balance of the house and he had no desire to deal with hurt feelings during his holiday.

Everyone sang ‘happy birthday’ and at the end, he and Bedelia leaned in to blow out the candles; there was cheering as each flame was annihilated and he smiled to his cousin, the gesture as meaningless to him as it was to her. Candles plucked off the cake and set on a paper plate, Hannibal began to slice the cake, efficiently passing out the slices on plates as quick as he could, trying to get the dessert to everyone around the large table. Cake was given to every photographer in hopes it would distract them from their job and he managed to pass along a slice to Will, who still lurked between a china cabinet and side table; he was attending merely out of duty, loyalty to Hannibal, which he would reward him for later.

As their Kennedys ate their cake, Bedelia and he ceremoniously exchanged gifts and opened them at the same time, both carefully unwrapping the crisp papers and ribbons. It appeared they’d gone down the same safe route of purchasing books for one another and he felt a modicum of annoyance that she’d picked out a book for him on George Washington’s religious writings, instead of something he’d actually be interested in reading, but they both laughed as though they found the matter amusing. Hannibal honestly couldn’t remember a time they weren’t performing in front of a camera.

He noted that one of the younger cousins was holding Bedelia’s phone, taking pictures of the event.

Finally the time came for the party to come to an end and after the right amount of handshakes, kisses on various cheeks, and amicable smiles, he was able to leave for the summer home. Once alone in his bedroom, leaving Will to collect his presents and bring them to the house, he opened up his iPad to see what analysis Freddie Lounds had given to the celebration on the compound that particular night. He had no doubt that Freddie’s article was already written, it was simply a wait to see when she’d receive the necessary photograph to accompany it. He had to refresh the page a three times before it final updated with a large headline.

BIRTHDAY BASH FOR PRESIDENT AND VICE!!!

He sighed. The photo chosen was of he and Bedelia blowing out the candles on the cake as others around them laughed and smiled. Not particularly flattering and he allowed himself to feel the annoyance that this was the one his cousin had submitted to the tabloid journalist before reading the article. It wasn’t interesting and eventually delved off into explanation as to how he and Bedelia were actually related, which led to reader comments questioning his accent yet again.

There was a knock on the bedroom and as Hannibal closed the iPad’s cover he called out, “Please come in.”
Will entered, carrying something that had been wrapped in brown paper and tied up with fabric ribbons that Hannibal recognised as being from the floral department of the White House. Hannibal could see his unease and inhaled as carefully as possible; the air in the room now had the scent of Will’s body—sweat, the ocean, the aftershave he’d borrowed from Hannibal. It was better than the birthday candles’ smoke that still lingered in his nostrils.

“I…have this for you,” Will mumbled as Hannibal stood from the bed.

“You didn’t need to get me anything,” Hannibal said affectionately as he accepted the gift.

Will stood with enough distance between the two of them that Hannibal couldn’t make easy physical contact, which indicated that Will was distressed over the matter of giving him something. As he neatly and slowly untied the ribbons, he recalled that Will seemed prone to gift giving when he was upset—the party had probably aggravated him enough to need to offer (what was most definitely a book) something to Hannibal. The curiosity within him made him want to rush, but he was delicate with the brown paper, feeling very much like he was dissecting Will. What could he possibly have found on such short notice for him? He hadn’t gone to town since arriving, so it was most likely something personal. Or had he perhaps asked someone to run to the shops to buy something for him?

His fingers lifted the contents up for him to study what had been given to him.

It was a worn, cheap hardback copy of the collected works of Khalil Gibran; the binding was falling apart and the slip cover was missing, oily fingermarks on the edges where it had been held open. And while Hannibal had never seen the book before, he recognised it instantly. This was the high school graduation present Will’s drunk failure of a father had given him, too unsophisticated to realise it was book about poetry and not of history.

“Oh, William.” He looked up, hand splayed protectively over the cover. “You didn’t have to.”

Will’s head was still lowered. “I wanted you to have it.”

Hannibal knew it hadn’t been brought up to celebrate the belated birthday, that the younger man had been intending to give it to him as an absolute declaration of love—he wouldn’t part with the book for anything less than absolute certainty. He’d come to Hyannis Port on the premise that they were definitely in love. Hannibal was grateful that he’d not held back from saying the three words that Will had wanted to hear most. Will had just given him his heart.

“You’ve been carrying this with you. Waiting for the right time to give it to me.”

Will’s voice was hardly audible, filled with shame and relief. “Yes.”

“I shall treasure it for the rest of our lives,” Hannibal promised, because he knew in that moment that Will would always belong to him. Will made a choked noise and turned his head away, no doubt swept up on the high of emotions from the day—the finality of his pursuit of Alana, the closure of what his relationship to Hannibal meant.

“You mustn’t be ashamed to cry, my dear Will. Let us go to bed.”

He revelled in the bliss of Will’s body that night, pinning him to the mattress; he managed to coax exhausted laughter out of the younger man and kissed away the trail of tears from his cheeks. Will came with a sob and soon fell into an exhausted sleep, leaving Hannibal to appraise the gift he’d been given. A third edition from a mass printing, carried from the cheap roadside motels of the south to Washington DC and held for almost two decades, read and reread, memorised, analysed, and desired to be used. Hannibal doubted that there had ever been anyone in Will’s life worthy of the
poetry from the treasured book and he brought the book to his nose, inhaling. Traces of motor oil from the boat motors he repaired, dust of the house in Wolf Trap, and along the spine was the hint of encephalitis, perhaps the book carried along with him to doctor’s appointments and read in bed while recovering, sweat soaking into the paper and cardboard.

Will turned towards him, seeking him out even in sleep and Hannibal couldn’t deny him. Returning the book to the bedside table, he lie back down beside the younger man and allowed himself sleep.

*****

Will was relaxed in an Adirondack chair that had been tucked into a quiet section of the garden between massive red spider lilies and some sort of fragrant plant that smelt of rosemary. Maybe it was rosemary. Reading one of the books Hannibal had brought along for himself while two of his dogs were sleeping at his feet, he had to admit he’d never been this relaxed in his whole life. There weren’t any personalities cluttering his head, there weren’t any concerns about work, or politics, or the state of the union…

He looked up from the pages and saw Hannibal standing in front of him.

“Hello,” he said softly, noting that Hannibal seemed relaxed, which meant he wasn’t there with any type of bad information.

Hannibal glanced at the dogs and the book. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

Will nodded his head, smiling. “Yes.”

“Good.” Hannibal knelt down in front of Will, one of his hands touching Will’s wrist. “Will, would you like to go for a night time sail with Abigail and I?”

Will’s eyes widened slightly. “Really? Can we?”

“Yes, but I need to know right now so that the Secret Service can prepare.”

Will nodded quickly, his movement jerking. “Yeah, that would be great.”

“We could look at the stars,” Hannibal murmured.

Warmth curled in Will’s chest. “Our own little boat out on the ocean.”

“Yes.”

Will knew that they were under the constant threat of being seen, but he was willing to take the chance to lean forward and kiss Hannibal. They feeling of warm lips was so relaxing and for a moment he wished they didn’t have the jobs they did, that they didn’t have to carefully choreograph everything to fit around the picture perfect image Hannibal needed to sustain his presidency. Will didn’t fit into that equation.

Will pulled away and lowered his eyes to look at the other man’s content smile.

“I shall let you continue reading, then.”

As Hannibal stood, Will asked, “When’s dinner?”

“Are you feeling hungry?”

Will shook his head. “Not yet. Just curious.”
“In a few hours. I must allow Abigail time to return from her trip to Nantucket.” He brushed stray bits of grass and leaf matter off his trousers. “I am going to Bedelia’s for tea. She wishes to speak with me before returning to Washington tonight.”

Will nodded, easing back into his chair. “I’ll be here.”

“Enjoy your book.”

*****

They took the boat off the dock at a little past eleven that night, the moon full and high above them. The stars were scattered about them and the island of Nantucket was easy to locate with their lights across the water. They were quiet and the air felt thick with promise; Will watched the other two, studying their neutral expressions as he sat on the deck. He turned his eyes back up at the stars.

This wasn’t just a joyride. There was something else going on.

“Where are we going?” he finally asked as land was no longer visible.

“We’re making a break for international waters,” Abigail said, her lips quirking just enough that Will suspected it was a joke.

“Where’s Secret Service?” he asked, because they were completely alone for once and the last thing they needed to do as ditch their security details.

“The Navy’s below us at the moment,” Hannibal assured him.

“Really?”

“Yes. The Secret Service is watching from various stealth boats and from land.”

Will glanced over the edge of the boat as though he’d see the Navy’s watercrafts below the dark waves.

“So we have privacy in our golden cage,” Abigail stood from the cabin rooftop and walked around to stand by him.

Will frowned, a slight unease starting to quell in his stomach. “What are we up to? Are we really heading out to international waters?”

Hannibal was lowering the anchor for the boat and Abigail was already going into the cabin of the boat, Hannibal following after her.

“Will, if you will join us in the cabin, please.”

He shadowed them hesitantly, feeling as though he was descending down into the unknown by walking down the steps. The cabin was small for three people and Will was instantly claustrophobic, though he was keenly aware that his discomfort was stemming from the fact that he was asking questions and not getting any answers.

“Have you ever seen blood in the moonlight, Will?” Hannibal asked, his face covered in shadows. “It looks almost black.”

Will turned to glance back at the doorway, the urge to run out overwhelming, and in the light of the moon he saw the flash of the blade in Abigail’s hand. “Hold on—“
He inhaled sharply as she brought the blade across her palm quickly.

“Abigail!” he choked out, frozen in horror.

She passed the knife over to Hannibal, who did the same and then held the knife out to him. Will stared at the knife—linoleum, sharp, personal to them—and could smell the blood in the air.

“William.” He continued holding out the knife to Will.

Will took it, hand shaking as he saw his left hand was already waiting palm up. “What are we doing?”

Hannibal waited until they made eye contact. “Becoming family.”

“We’ll be part of one another always,” Abigail added.

Will pulled the knife across palm, exhaling loudly and letting it fall to the cabin floor.

Abigail’s thumb was pressing into her cut, causing blood to pool up in her palm. She smiled at him and formed a fist, holding it over his cut palm, and the blood fell in large, dark drops across the open skin. He stared at it and then realised that Hannibal was holding out his bleeding palm expectantly. He clenched his hand into a fist—*‘Her blood is in me right now’*—and held it over Hannibal’s. Hannibal nodded his approval and when Will withdrew his hand, Hannibal brought his hand to Abigail’s. The blood dripped into her palm and then she repeated the action of sharing the blood with her father, who held his hand out, cupping the blood that was staining their palms and fingers.

Then it was Will’s turn and he accepted the dark liquid again. The blood was warm and he turned to Abigail, who was smiling at him expectantly. *‘She’s hurt,’* he thought to himself and using his untouched hand, cradled her injured palm, then allowed his blood to spill onto the open wound. He folded her fingers closed and he held her hands between his, disregarding the pain as he tried protect her from what the linoleum knife had done to her. Will suddenly felt merged and committed on a far grander scale than possible—this was something bigger than he’d ever experienced—*‘They’re bleeding for me, they’re buying family with their own blood, she’s scared to death that we could leave her at any moment and this is how she can keep us with her forever. We can never turn her away now. She belongs to us and we belong to her.’*—and he looked up into her eyes, which were watering.

“Now we’re all family. Forever.” Her voice was exhausted, relieved, elated.

Hannibal had retrieved a first aid kit from a corner of the cabin and as his mind spun wildly at the implications of what he’d just done—*This is how people catch blood-borne illnesses. What if our blood isn’t compatible? Won’t this make us sick?*—and he felt himself being manipulated careful by both husband and daughter as the boat rocked. He looked down and saw Hannibal had started to stitch the cut on his left hand closed, his fingers nimble and steady. Abigail was pressing her fingers into her palm, tracing the dark black blood until her fingertips were covered and sticky.

“What about you?” he asked, looking at Hannibal’s hands which had been wiped clean and bandaged with Steri-Strips.

“I cut mine shallow,” Hannibal explained casually, as though he did blood binding all the time.

“Cheater,” Will choked out, a strange laugh escaping and Hannibal smiled.

“Why are you crying?” Abigail asked, the beginning of a frown on her lips.
Will reached up and found that there were tears on his face and he looked down at his hands, blood on one, saline on the others. Was he emotional because he was reflecting the emotions of the other two in the boat with him or was this his own response to what had just happened? Did it even matter? He wanted to kiss them both, wrap them up in his arms and live within the moment forever, where nothing existed beyond them and the boat, a world in the dark on the ocean.

“We’re family now, Will,” Hannibal said, his hand coming to rest on his shoulder. “You have to make family.”

*****

As Will lie beside Hannibal that night, unable to fall asleep, he thought over what had happened only hours before.

It had been absolutely terrifying. Not so much because of the blood or the fact they were lighting candles on the fucking sloop and calling upon the blessings of a dead president, but because he had been suddenly faced with reality that there were two people in his life that never wanted to give him up or forget about him. They wanted him permanently, so much so that they were willing to hurt themselves for it. They wanted to share an actual physical bond with him, to mingle bloods, to make a silent—permanent—claim over him.

“Sympathetic magic,” he whispered.

Hannibal’s eyes fluttered open and he looked at Will. “Is everything all right, Will?”

“Sorry, just talking to myself. Go back to sleep,” he murmured.

“You mustn’t stay up. What can I do to help you sleep?” Hannibal’s hand placed itself over his heart.

He felt the twinge of healing skin on his palm. “You really love me?”

“As much as I love Abigail.”

“I love you, too.”

“Rest.”

They kissed one another in the dark until Will felt his eyelids become too heavy to remain open and then they remained embraced until the emptiness of slumber claimed them.

*****

In the morning, Hannibal had Will helping him with breakfast before Abigail arrived downstairs, followed by a three of his strays, whom she let outside to run around the garden.

“Hello, Dad One and Dad Two,” she greeted as she came over to inspect the food they were working on.

Hannibal’s lips twitched into a slight smile. “Who is who?”

She paused and then amended, “Dad and Daddy.”

“I like the sound of that,” Will admitted as he chopped the green onions Hannibal would be adding to the omelets.

“I like having the three of us together.” She glanced up at Will. “You like being called ‘Dad’, right?
If you’d prefer something else…”

“No, that’s fine.” Will kept his eyes on the food, but shifted his weight to lean closer to the young woman. “If, uh, you aren’t planning on spending time with your family, I thought maybe I could take you fishing today.”

“There really isn’t anywhere to fly fish here…” She leaned against him with her elbow. “But maybe you could teach me how to cast off?”

“Sure. I’d like that.” He glanced over to Hannibal. “Would you like to join us?”

Hannibal poured the eggs he’d been whisking with a hint of cream into an oiled pan on the stove. “I’m afraid I must attend to other matters. Perhaps she can show me this evening what she has learned.”

It was a twenty-five minute walk to the fishing spot due to the escort of Secret Service agents with them, forcing them to walk slower and occasionally wait while areas of the path were cleared. But they arrived to the location without a hitch and Will pulled a bag out of the pair of waders he had slung over his shoulder and handed the contents of the bag over to her.

“I brought you a pair of waders. They should fit.”

“Oh, thank you.” She made a face. “They smell.”

“Because they’re new. The rubber is strong at first. We can hang them outside tonight to let them air out.” He frowned and then added. “If it gives you a headache, you don’t have to wear them.”

“I’m fine. Daddy would get a headache, though.”

“Is his nose really that sensitive?” As soon as the words left his mouth, he remembered his encephalitis. “Stupid…question.”

“It’s that sensitive.”

He took her fishing pole. “I never thought it might make him uncomfortable, though.”

She leaned against a tree for balance as she pulled off her shoes and began to pull them on. “Have to be careful about everything. Laundry detergent, shampoo, perfume, fast food—“

“Fast food?”

“He hates the grease.” She let out a laugh. “I have to shower every time Marissa—“ Her smile disappeared and she looked away. “Anytime Marissa and I had junk food.”

Will hesitated, unsure what he was supposed to do, but finally touched her shoulder. “I’m sorry about Marissa.”

She tapped the side of her head and gave a weak smile. “I have her up here.”

He wanted to assure her that she was very brave, that she was safe, but he wasn’t sure if that’s what she wanted to hear. So he nodded once, keeping his eyes lowered, choosing to focus on his waders instead.

She stared at him with a decidedly blank look. “We look like dorks.”

He smiled slightly, entirely comfortable with how they looked. “We look like fishers.”
She took a step out into the water, arms held out as she tried to keep her balance on the rocks. “Fisher of men.”

He raised an eyebrow and followed her a few feet off the creekbank. “Wasn’t that Jesus?”

She shook her head. “His apostles.”

“Lecter’s fisher of men.” He tried not to smirk.

She gave him a lopsided smile. “We should call ourselves that.”

He laughed softly, willing to play along. “Let’s see—we’d have Alana, the Vice President, Jack—“

“Mrs Crawford,” she added.

“That’s six. We’re halfway there.” He stopped playing long enough to help her with favoured fishing rod he’d gifted to her. “Do you remember how I showed you to—oh, that’s perfect.”

Abigail flicked the line the way he’d demonstrated and reeled it back in, repeating the motion a few times until she seemed confident. Will smiled and decided to cast his line in the creek as well; there was quiet between them and the only sounds around them were the songs of birds in the trees and the water burbling. It was peaceful, wonderful, and he was getting to share it with someone he wanted to share everything with. He brought his line back in and cast it again; he was aware that the likelihood they’d catch anything was very slim, but there was no harm in going through the motions—fishing was a soother for him and it was serving him well at the moment.

“There was a butcher beheaded here when Daddy was sixteen.”

Will frowned, but didn’t look at the young woman at his side. For a moment, he pretended he had imagined what she’d said, but from her body language, he knew that she had in fact spoken.

“That’s horrible,” he finally said.

She gave a casual shrug. “No one really felt bad. He was a racist. He didn’t really fit in here.”

“Was his murder ever caught?” The temperature seemed to drop a few degrees.

“The local police thought it might be mafia related.”

“Mafia?” He turned to look at her and saw that she wasn’t holding the rod properly for casting. “No, that’s goin’ get you caught in the trees, baby.”

She allowed him to correct her. “Better?”

“Very.” He let her go. “Okay, now try.”

“I did it!”

He grinned at her enthusiasm. “Dance it across the top. That’s what the fish look for.”

“They look for something to eat. That’s how you lure them in,” she said, jerking the fishing pole carefully so that the hand-tied fly jumped across the water.

Will watched her for a moment, because there was something hidden in her words, something beneath the surface. He couldn’t place it as she flicked the small lure across the water, her eyes intent on the surface of the water. She wanted him to hear something more, something that was meant to
tell him—

A branch behind him broke and his head snapped around. It was just Agent Matthews, one of the three agents who’d followed them to the fishing spot. Will stared, his mind spread in a thousand different directions and he knew something was off—what had been off? Was it the breaking of branches in a place where a man had been beheaded?—but Abigail was here and he was teaching her how to fish. She was smiling at him and he pushed his thoughts aside, smiling back at her.

“You’re doing good, baby,” he said quietly, giving her a reassuring nod.

She nodded and looked back out at the water. Fisher of men, he thought. The girl that had caught Will Graham.

*****

Hannibal found Will out on the beach, stumbling in the sand with a bottle of beer in his hand. The sun had set an hour previous, leaving him alone in the summer home, which had been a distinctly uneasy feeling—he enjoyed solitude, but not when it came so easily here in Hyannis Port. No, he wanted Will to himself and he wasn’t anywhere close. So he sought him out, learning from an off-duty Katz and Zeller that he’d trailed after them and they’d given him a few beers before he’d left. Hannibal tried to ignore their laughter—Will wasn’t their pathetic pet to be gifted alcohol for socialising. Out on the gentle surf he found the younger man with his jean cuffs rolled up and feet wet. Hannibal followed him for a while, listening to the younger man rambling out at the ocean before finally approaching him.

“Will, let us retire to bed.”

Will dropped his bottle to the ground and wrapped his arms around Hannibal’s neck, leaning his face in close. “Fuck me in the shower tonight.”

“No, Will. You have had too much to drink and you can’t give your full consent.”

“And they say chivalry is dead.” Will purred then pulled his head back. “I’m going to brush my teeth, okay? I don’t think it would be fair to you if my breath didn’t smell good.”

“That’s very considerate, Will. Thank you.” Hannibal picked up the dropped bottle and emptied what remained out on the sand.

“I’ll carry it. The White House promotes recycling.”

Hannibal made a hum of agreement as Will took it from him and together they walked up to the house; Abigail had already gone to bed and Hannibal led Will upstairs after they deposited the brown bottle in the mudroom. Will was particularly grabby, trying to plant sloppy kisses on Hannibal’s face and touch him, but he kept Will’s advances at bay, not interested in being manhandled. He ended up showering with Will, not wanting to go to bed with anyone who smelt of Coors that had been spilt down the front of his chest. Will had held onto him and hummed against his neck as Hannibal shampooed his hair, scrubbed his body, and rinsed him clean; these acts of comfort were relaxing for him, reminding him the cherishing care he used to extend to Abigail when she was a child. No doubt it reminded Will of the rare moments he’d received rare physical affection from his boat mechanic father, the one who could never make ends meet; he kissed Will’s wet temple, murmuring gentle praise for being ‘such a good boy’ and Will made himself smaller in Hannibal’s arms. There was room in no one else in Will’s mind. Hannibal wanted to be the beginning and the end, the only one his beautiful Will had ever known. One day the life Will had lived before him would be the faintest memory, one that wasn’t welcome and Hannibal wanted to see everything replaced with his own
existence.

After he towelled them both dry, Hannibal shut him in the bathroom with instructions to brush his teeth and relieve himself before coming to bed and thankfully, Will did as he was told. Clumsy, Will tripped over his own ankles, falling hard to the wood floor of the bedroom, cursing quietly; somewhat disinterested, Hannibal asked if he was hurt, which Will promised he wasn’t, crawling up into bed and once again trying to slip his hands down the front of Hannibal’s night clothes.

“No, my love.” Hannibal kissed the younger man.

Will stretched against him under the top sheet. “Okay, can we talk then?”

“What would you like to talk about then?”

“You. Us. Why you like me.” Will’s eyes locked onto his. “You like me. I know you do.”

“I do like you. And I’m glad you know it.” Hannibal brought Will’s lips to his. “It will make it harder for you to leave me.”

“Do you love me?”

“I do,” he admitted. “I find myself absolutely enraptured with your existence.”

“Do you want to get married?” Will asked.

Hannibal kissed his brow. “Yes. Though not right away. We can wait.”

“I want to wear a really nice suit.”

His lips twitched in a smile. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Abigail can carry the rings.”

“Do you want a wedding?” Hannibal had never considered the matter for himself.

“No. No, I don’t think so. Too many people.” Will stroked a hand across Hannibal’s stomach. “You know, your cousin Bedelia got married the same day I graduated from high school?”

Hannibal was aware of this. “I walked her down the aisle.”

“Did you wish it was you getting married?”

“No. I never imagined I would find someone I wanted to share everything with,” he replied honestly.

“I never imagined anyone would, would want to listen to everything I say.”

“What do you worry about telling me, Will?” he asked, masking any excitement he might feel at a confession he might be offered.

And as expected, Will did not disappoint. “That the other night when you fucked me into the mattress, I was imagining I was the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Oh?”

“But that’s, I don’t want you to know about that.”
“You can trust me, Will,” Hannibal promised.

After an hour of talking, Will was half asleep, half drunk. Hannibal was himself feeling drunk with the level of power he had over his partner at the moment; his hands were all over Will, comforting and filled with the affectionate love he felt for the younger man. Will had been confessing every thought he found vulgar and Hannibal was left absolutely smitten. Will could dream up things more artistic and cruel than he and he was awaiting the day he could watch him act upon those fantasies; Hannibal pressed his fingers against the developing bruise on the younger man’s kneecap as he listened to Will continue talking.

Will had been talking about skinning and Hannibal wanted nothing more than to take a midnight voyage out to Nantucket, find one of the summer birds, and watch Will give him a lesson about how to properly remove the flesh from a person’s arms and face. He tucked the thought away for a later date.

“So if I peel everything back, what would I find inside of you?” Will asked, tracing a finger across his collarbone.

Hannibal kissed Will’s cheekbones. “Dante’s inferno.”

“What about Abigail?”

Hannibal kissed Will’s eyelids. “Sugars and spice, and everything nice.”

Will laughed softly and squirmed in his arms.

“And we would find antlers and the winter’s frost inside you,” Hannibal murmured, which caused Will to shudder at the thought. “It takes a temperature of 1,800 Fahrenheit to ensure bone disintegrates. How hot do you suppose Hell becomes?”

Will looked up at him, eyes suddenly suspicious. “Do you think you’ll destroy me?”

“Never. The cold always sucks the life out of heat.”

“Hell is supposed to be cold, you know. Some college kids at Fresno State proved the thermodynamics of Hell to be endothermic,” Will informed him. “And isn’t the innermost level of Dante’s inferno a frozen lake of blood and guilt?” Suddenly that made the younger man’s face. “Do you feel guilt, Hannibal? Because of what happened to your family?” Will sat up, then leaned over Hannibal so that their faces were close. He looked devastated. “You shouldn’t. It wasn’t your fault. Don’t…don’t let the blood and guilt freeze you, mon chou, mon cœur.” He pressed a kiss to Hannibal’s mouth, the pity cloying. “I love you, I love you…”

Will moved the kisses down Hannibal’s body and he allowed the younger man to tug open his pants, softly making indiscernible words of admiration (whether for Hannibal’s personality or his size, he wasn’t sure) before bringing his mouth down to kiss at his limp cock.

A desire to offer comfort—Hannibal sighed contentedly as he stroked Will’s head gently, using a hand that had two central digits, but lacked a little finger, one that had a tight wound across the palm that would leave a faint scar. As a rule, Will offered comfort to no one because he didn’t understand comfort in the first place, but Lecters seemed to be the only arena in which he tried. Anyone else who might have tried to offer Hannibal a blow job after bringing up Mischa would have found their neck snapped and face savaged, but Will was simply…Will. ‘Physical comfort, wishing to see me smile rather than cry from being held and talked to, wanting to exhaust me so I can fall asleep in his arms and he’ll feel like he’s protecting me. That he can care for me.’
And so Hannibal allowed Will to feel as though he could take care of him. It was sloppy, but certainly heartfelt and as he moaned for Will’s sake, he adjusted his morning schedule to accommodate for Will’s hangover and the subsequent care he would require in turn. He smiled, brushing a thumb affectionately against Will’s ear. Beautiful, sweet Will, never helpless but always in need of someone to watch out for him. Hannibal wanted to be that person.

While he had all the patience in the world for Will, he was ready to sleep and knew his bedmate was as well, so he allowed his breath to hitch loudly and he moaned again, exciting Will to attempt swallowing him a little deeper, his cheeks hollowing. He began to whisper praise for Will, edging himself towards release then coaxed the younger man back up his body so that he could finish the ordeal, wanting to return the courtesy. Will wasn’t fully erect, though that was quickly solved after a few strokes of his hand.

Hannibal held him closely, alternating touches between his own body and Will’s; Will began to ramble hazily in a mixture of creole and English, promising his love to Hannibal forever more and Hannibal finally brought them to climax in close enough succession that Will (if he could remember it in the morning) would believe it had been together. Now fully tired, though still half drunk, Will insisted Hannibal roll onto his side so that Will could curl around him in a protective gesture. Hannibal found it uncomfortable, but giving Will the illusion of control was a gift he was happy to offer. It took minutes for the younger man to fall asleep, his lips on the nape of Hannibal’s neck; the President chuckled and pulled Will’s arm closer around him as he closed his eyes.

*****

One of the younger second cousins had offered Will an old boat motor she’d found in the garage of the main house, when he’d asked at breakfast if there was one Hannibal had; he’d been hoping to get some quality time with Abigail and felt it might be nice to teach her something. After all, hadn’t Hannibal taught her everything else? And Will was feeling guilty for getting drunk the night before because that was something his dad would have done. How was he to set a good example for her if that’s how he was going to behave?

Will spent the afternoon singing along to oldies on radio, showing Abigail how to fix the motor. She was a quick study and while she couldn’t fix it on her own, she was able to follow along with what he taught her. For a moment he saw himself as his father and she as him, the only two people left in the world.

“I’m gonna teach you all about boats,” he said, his father's own Louisiana accent thick in his voice.

“I can’t wait, Dad.” The depths of her eyes were filled with love, and overwhelmed, he looked away, grinning at the title.

Ben E. King was playing on the radio and as he showed her how to properly loosen rusted out bolts, he sang along.

“So darlin’, darlin’, stand by me, ohhh, stand by me, oh stand, stand by me, stand by me…”

*****

“Tonight’s appetiser is salamugundy, with chicken oysters, salsify, marrow bone, and horseradish cream.”

Will wrinkled his nose, trying not to get sick at the thought of the two meats mixed together.

“Chicken and oysters?”
He was standing in the kitchen at Silver House, watching as Abigail and Hannibal worked on the food for dinner. Abigail was chopping herbs and Hannibal was heating oil in one of the pans on the stove.

Abigail shook her head. “Oysters are cut of meat on poultry. The tenderest part of the chicken is the oysters, on the outer side of the back.”

Hannibal came up behind her and squeezed along her lower spine. “Right here.”

Abigail jumped and squealed out a surprised laughed as she fought out of his hold, coming to hide behind Will’s side; Hannibal grinned, apparently pleased with the reaction to his anatomy lesson. Will might have found it funny, too, but something had flipped in his mind, a light switch coming on to illuminate the bodies of the Chesapeake Ripper’s victims.

“I’ve—I’ve never heard that expression before. Oysters.” He brought his glass of iced tea to his lips and tuned his family out as he thought.

*****

It was the early morning and Will was lying in bed awake, looking out the window at the faintest hint of dawn showing itself on the inky sky. He’d been unable to sleep, his mind twisting and tearing his thoughts about the Chesapeake Ripper all night long; his mind carefully looked over every crime scene photo and he’d found the single connexion he’d overlooked the entire time.

Hannibal stirred next to him and Will looked at him, feeling somber. The older man blinked at him, looking rather drowsy.

Will swallowed hard, unable to fake a smile for pleasantness sake. “Hannibal, the…”

He cut himself off and turned to look back at the window.

Hannibal propped himself up on an elbow. “What is it?”

Will choked out a bitter laugh. “It’s going to sound crazy.”

Hannibal frowned slightly. “You are worried to tell me what you see.”

“He’s um, he’s...eating them. The Chesapeake Ripper’s taking parts of people and eating them.” His voice was quiet and strained.

Hannibal said nothing at first, though his frown disappeared. “You are concerned that your judgement has been compromised because of your illness.”

Will nodded, scrubbing at his face with his palms. “I’m worried that thoughts about Garrett Jacob Hobbs are influencing me.”

Hannibal was quiet again and then lowered himself back down to the bed. “We shall take a day to think about your conclusion.”

“You don’t believe me.” Will couldn’t tell if he was more upset at himself or Hannibal.

“I…would like to explore other options first.”

“I’m not—I’ve been taking my medications.” He sounded like he was pleading.

“I know.”
“I’m not crazy.”

“I have not said that you are.”

Will felt the walls closing in on him and he clenched his fists, willing himself not to have a breakdown. “I need some air.”

“Take your time,” Hannibal said kindly as Will pushed himself out of bed and grabbed his clothes off the floor, hurrying to the bathroom to dress.

*****

Will returned to the property as Abigail was leaving for the main house, waving to him and calling out that she was going to be sailing with a few of the cousins over to Nantucket for the afternoon; he wanted her to be safe and told her to wear a life jacket—even from the distance between them, he could tell she was rolling her eyes at him as she waved goodbye. He sighed and walked into the house, finding Hannibal in the kitchen, washing a plate.

“Did you enjoy your walk, Will?” He dried the plate off and returned it to the cupboard.

He nodded, keeping his eyes anywhere by the other man. “I did.”

A pair of covered dishes were waiting by the stove and Hannibal brought them over to the kitchen table. “Shall we eat?”

“Did you wait for me?” Will asked, feeling guilty.

“Yes.”

Will sat down, allowing Hannibal to serve him breakfast, patient enough to sit and wait as the orange juice was brought back out and new toasts were made. Just as Hannibal was sitting down, an agent knocked on the back door and walked in, bringing over a handful of envelopes.

“Mail, President Lecter.”

After the agent was dismissed, Hannibal pulled out an ivory coloured envelope and handed it over to Will. Sure enough, his name was on the address for the Hyannis Port house.

“For me?”

“From my cousin Robert.”

“Oh, they didn’t have to…”

Using his butterknife (and not noticing Hannibal grimace), Will slit the top of the envelope and pulled out a card that had been printed with the Shriver family (including Dixie) on it. As he opened it, something fluttered out and he lifted it out of his lap; it was a cheque, the last thing he’d been expecting.

“It’s for fifteen hundred dollars.” He spoke more out of shock than the need to share the information.

Hannibal gently plucked the card from Will’s hand and read what written inside as Will continued gawking. “Will, thank you once again for letting us give Dixie a home. Our family is finally complete with her in it. We hope that our donation can help you rescue other dogs needing a good family.”
Will looked at the cheque for another minute, trying to decide if it would be more polite to accept it or to return it; Hannibal finally took it from him and carefully placed it back in the card which was set beside the vase of fresh flowers. Will watched Hannibal, who was cutting his food, but not eating anything. Will wanted to ask what the proper etiquette for large donations from significant other’s family members when it dawned on him that Hannibal was waiting for him to take the first bite. Quickly he shoveled some of the food from his plate onto his fork.

“S’good,” he said through the mouthful of sausage and potatoes.

Hannibal smiled and began to eat as well. Will allowed his leg to rest against the other man’s as he ate, allowing his mind to drift for a moment.

“Hannibal, I…I was wondering if I could ask you something.” He pierced the yolk of the egg sunny side up with the tines of his fork, watching the golden liquid pour out slowly.

“Anything, my dear Will.”

“Why don’t you want Abigail to have a dog?” Hannibal’s hands paused in opening an envelope and Will was quick to pacify him. “I don’t mean to question you, I just…” He stirred the yolk out into the surrounding potatoes. “She’s welcome to take one of mine. Or I could go with her to an animal shelter and help her pick one out. Or a breed rescue centre, if you wanted a specific type of dog.” He set his fork down, and decided that eye contact should be used to emphasise his sincerity. “I’m not trying to overstep your parental authority, but…”

Hannibal set the envelope down. “Would you like for Abigail to have a dog, or would you like for her to be happy, Will?”

“Happy.”

“I do not want her to get an animal simply because it is expected of her. I know that it is tradition for the First Family to have a pet, but I do not wish to rush a decision for the sake of pleasing the media.”

Will thought that was a bullshit answer, but didn’t want to argue so he simply nodded. “The offer still stands.”

“Thank you, Will. When the time is right, you and I shall make the decision together with her.”

*****

The week ended perfectly and as Will helped pack Hannibal’s (extensive) luggage the night before they were supposed to return to Washington, he listened to him promise, “We shall celebrate Christmas here, Will. And Thanksgiving.” Hannibal kissed his temple chastely and then added, “I shall return you to your Fifolat.”

Will knew he was being teased, but still felt it necessary to tell the other man that the boat was forgettable compared to what he had with the Lecters. “I want to come back for reasons other than the Fifolat.

Will couldn’t help but smile broadly as he watched Hannibal safely tuck the book of Khalil Gibran in between the briefings held in his attaché case. It was like watching Hannibal handle his heart, keeping it safe amongst the other important parts of his life.

“I’m very happy to hear that,” Hannibal told him.
The last bag was zipped and stacked beside the door for Will to carry downstairs in the morning to Marine One; Will’s own nylon duffle bag was stacked beside the elegant whiskey-coloured leather bags and suitcases. He made sure they were a neatly arranged as possible—both because he wants to be respectful of the other man’s belongings and because he knows how much order mattered to Hannibal. Satisfied, he turned to the bed; Hannibal first sat on the end, removing his shoes and then stood to further undress himself. While he didn’t smile, there wasn’t doubt in Will’s mind that the look in his eyes was meant to be mischievous, inviting Will to partake in his body. Will watched Hannibal silently until he stood naked beside the bed, waiting for Will to act. Reaching to the light switch, Will let the darkness surround him, grateful to be barefoot as he walked over to the other man.

“When love beckons to you, follow him, though his ways are hard and steep,” he quoted softly, his voice thick with desire. He knelt before Hannibal, kissing him down his chest and stomach to the rises of his hipbones. He looked up to Hannibal reverently.

Hannibal’s hand cupped his face, replying softly, “And when his wings enfold you yield to him, though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.”

Will stood and pushed Hannibal back onto the bed, admiring how his long legs hung over the edge of the mattress, how passive his body was splayed out. Undressing as he stood between Hannibal’s knees, watching the other man’s dark eyes drifting down his body to stare at the tenting of his shorts, Will decided that he wasn’t self-conscious because in Hannibal’s mind there couldn’t be room for anything save love.

Crawling up Hannibal’s body, knowing without looking that his lover would have left the bottle of lubricant on the nightstand, he responded. “And when he speaks to you believe in him.”

The last part of the poem remained unspoken, their mouths far too busy devouring one another as Will laid claim to the body beneath him, and soon their minds had forgotten that which hadn’t been voiced.

*Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.*
An Intermission!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
It is snowing again and Hannibal shivers, gathering his sister into his arms in an effort to protect her from the cold outside and drafts inside the embassy. The soldiers have locked them in the room for the night and Hannibal has already burned half of the books on the lowest bookshelf and a very stately chair in an attempt to warm them. Together they’re wrapped up in all the heavy golden curtains he’s torn down, a nest in front of the fireplace.

“I’m hungry,” Mischa murmurs.

“I know. I have nothing more to feed you.”

“I want more candy.” Her breath no longer smells of liquorice.

“I have no more.” He’s already checked his pockets a dozen times.

“I want Mama.”

His chin rests against her soft tow-coloured head. “I know.”

“Why won’t those men feed us?” she asks, mystified. She is innocent, has never encountered an adult with ill intentions.

His eyes narrow and his fingers grip at her tighter. “Because they’re bad.”

“Why won’t Mama and Dada take us home?”

“Mama and Dada are…gone.”

“When are they coming back?”

He closes his eyes and fights the painful knot of dread in his stomach. “I don’t know.”

Hannibal looks up and to the windows; from here he can see the statue of the large angel that looks out over the city of Vilnius where the American Embassy is located within Lithuania. ‘The Angel of Our People,’ his father had told him…Hannibal knows that his parents aren’t coming back for them. They’re lying dead on the first floor of the embassy, gunned down by the soviet soldiers that had stormed the embassy that morning. While he and his little sister had been dragged away to a library and office on the third floor, he also suspects that the few employees of the embassy are dead as well, as he’d heard screaming and gunshots.

“It’s cold.” Mischa curls closer to him.

“I know.” He kisses her forehead. “Thank you for not crying. You break my heart when you cry.”

“Can you ask the bad men for food?” There is hope in her voice.

“No. They won’t give us any.” He strokes her head, hoping his small hands will warm her skin. “But
just think—in a few weeks it will be Thanksgiving and we’ll be at home in Paris and we’ll have all the food we want. Pia will cook a large turkey and Josef and Erik will have breads and cake—"

“And Mama will make me hardboiled eggs!”

Hannibal buries his face into her hair, eyes burning with tears. “Yes, yes, dozens of them! And I’ll let you sit at the head of the table and I’ll bring you anything you want!”

“And I want a soda pop!” she says brightly.

He can picture the large feast that will be created in her honour. He will have her dressed up in the finest dress Paris can offer and she’ll wear their mother’s best jewellery and she’ll laugh in delight as he has their kitchen staff bring out platters of food.

“Yes, I’ll bring you bottles of root beer for you to try and dishes of ice cream and strawberries and roast duck…”

“And baby tomatoes.”

He has no idea where they’ll get small tomatoes during the cusp of winter, but he’ll find a way.

“Yes, baskets of baby tomatoes.”

She turns her head to look up at him. “Give me something to eat.”

There is only lint in his pocket, the only thing he has left, so he offers it to her. “Chew this—"

She makes a face. “That’s not food.”

“I know. Pretend it is. Let it get soft and warm in your mouth,” he says gently.

Dutifully, because she is an exceptional child, she does as she’s told and chews on the lint. He closes his eyes and fights the hunger he feels, grateful that he’s been able to ease her suffering.

*****

It’s two days into the ordeal and Hannibal has been reading aloud parts of the books on the shelves before burning them. It’s difficult to keep a two year old’s attention and to keep her quiet, especially in a crisis situation.

“Mischa, wrap yourself up. I’m going to open the window.”

She does as she’s told and he opens the window briefly. The air is bone chillingly cold even though it’s the afternoon. If they weren’t on the third floor and facing the courtyard, he might have considered an escape through the window, but leaving here would end in nothing but death. He scoops the snow on the ledge into a commemorative piece of china that had been on one of the library shelves behind the desk and quickly shuts the window, running back over to the fireplace. Setting the bowl in the hot embers he’s been stoking, he rubs his now freezing and aching fingers quickly against his trouser legs. He swears to himself that he will not allow his body to rule him, but instead become his body’s master. Acknowledging the weakness of his own physical mortality is not what he needs.

As the snow begins to heat slowly so as not to crack the bowl, he thinks about the tutor that is no doubt dead downstairs. He mourns the man’s loss to the world briefly—he would have made a good teacher to Mischa as well and he regrets never insisting harder that his sister be allowed to attend his lessons with him during the day. But when he gets back to Paris, he’ll ensure she’s with him
constantly. They’ll never be apart again.

The water now warm, he pours a small portion into the nice silver pen holder that had been on the desk and hands it to her. “Pretend it’s tea. We’re having a tea social together.”

As expected, Mischa enjoys this idea. “Like Mama!”

“Yes. Here’s your tea cup. And here’s mine.” He pours his warmed water into the crystal ashtray he’d also found on the desk. “Thank you for inviting me to have tea with you, Countess Lecter. It is so gracious of you to have me over.”

Mischa drinks her water greedily and smiles at him. “My tummy doesn’t hurt anymore.”

He pours her more, imagining that they’re really just playing make believe in her bedroom as they used to. “Good, good.”

*****

“Hold still and it will be clean,” the leader of the soviet soldiers tells him, holding out the meat cleaver. “They want proof you’re alive.”

Hannibal screams for his mama even though he knows she’s dead—it’s not something he’s proud of because it’s weakness, nothing more than a little boy frightened. He continues trying to pull free of the men, wanting to run out of this kitchen

“It’s either you or your sister!” the man snarls, grabbing Hannibal by the throat.

Hannibal instantly quiets, terrified of anything happening to Mischa because of him. Better him than her. He flattens his right hand on the butcher block and the soldiers count his fingers one, two, three, four, five, six—

“Show me his other hand,” the leader demands, frowning.

His left is shown in the air and one of the other men calls out, “Six on this one, too!”

“We’ll fix that. Give you normal hands,” the leader says with a dark smile.

The cleaver is brought down and Hannibal bites hard into his bottom lip, trying to stifle the cry that threatens to rise out. The little finger—‘digitus minimus manus’ he thinks to himself absently—rolls off the butcher block and the amputation doesn’t hurt right away as he looks at the blood. Numbly, he feels his other hand brought up to the block and as he feels the tears start to fall down his cheeks at the burning pain in his right hand, the knife is brought down a second time, removing the little finger on his left hand.

He’s released and he clutches his injured hands to his body, feeling so helpless. The soldiers are talking quickly and he watches his two fingers get wrapped up in a piece of newspaper as he’s led back to the study where Mischa is. The room is dark save for the fire and he doesn’t go over to her immediately, shushing her with a shaky voice as he goes over to the window. Icy air hits him hard in the face as he opens it and sticks his bleeding hands into the snow on the ledge. The tears left on his face burn from the freezing air and he fights back a scream at the throbbing, aching pain.

When he’s no longer able to bear the frozen snow on his hands and remaining fingers, he shut the window and returns to the nest of curtains in front of the fireplace, burrowing in beside his sister.

*****
“Shhh,” he comforts as his sister shivers against him, her face pale in the dawn light. “Do you remember the song Pia was teaching us in the kitchens?”

Mischa smiles at the thought of their cook back in Paris. “Yes.”

It’s the sixth day being held captive here in the embassy and Hannibal is becoming uneasy at the lack of American presence. He’s heard the gunfights in front of the embassy for the past two days and knows that people know they’re inside, otherwise there wouldn’t be fighting. But why haven’t they been rescued yet?

“Let’s sing it together,” he says, smiling to her. He hates smiling. “Jesus bleibet meine Freude… meines Herzens Trost und Saft…Jesus wehret allem Leide…er ist meines Lebens Kraft.” She smiles back at him and he continues. “meiner Augen Lust und Sonne…meiner Seele Schatz und Wonne; darum laß’ ich Jesum nicht, aus dem Herzen und Gesicht.”

He touches her head gently, covering her cold cheek with his icy fingers. She hasn’t noticed anything wrong with his hands, yet. She sings along with him in repetitions and he harmonises their voices together, memorising every note and storing it away as individual gems within the world inside his mind. The small jewels reside in the expensive jewellery box his mother stores her bijoux, safely rested on the counter in her dressing room. He can smell her perfume and hear her playing the piano in his parents’ bedroom, but he doesn’t open the door.

He has been delighted to discover that Mischa is capable of entering the world within him and they’ve passed many hours running exploring the streets of Venice where their mother grew up and running through the vegetable and herb garden behind the kitchens at the manor in Paris. He also takes her to New York City where Uncle Robertas lives and shows her the tall skyscrapers—she was born in Paris and has never been to America.

But she’s two and her mind is still fairly unsophisticated, so he has to narrate and guide her much of the time, having her close her eyes as he speaks to her. She clings to him in their frigid room, lost in the dreamworld and he keeps the embers tended to as he tells her about the castle he can build within her.

That afternoon he’s taken down to the kitchens where the soldiers are ransacking the pantries. He can smell potatoes that were cooked recently and nearly demands they clean up the kitchen as it is absolutely filthy and he would never leave it in such a state, but bites his tongue. Information is demanded of him—where were the weapons stored (‘There are none that I know of, sir’), where his father stored his valuables (‘He left those in America, sir’), how much his country will pay for his safe return (‘Both Lithuania and America would pay a sizable ransom for my sister and I, sir’). Hannibal prefers speaking Lithuanian and talks calmly to the man whom he loathes, the leader. Inside, he is smiling at how his dialect is upper class and stately compared to the leader’s lowly, slang ridden speech.

After the man’s questions have been answered, Hannibal makes a request of his own. “My sister needs food.”

The man glares at him “Shut up!”

“I don’t want any for myself, but she must have something to eat.” He feigns humility. “Please.”

The man pulls eggshells off the counter and throws them on the floor. “There. Give that to your sister.”

Hannibal scrambles to pick up the egg shells out from under the stomping boot, feeling his left hand
getting caught under the sharp heel. He manages to grab each small piece as the men laugh at him, though, and when he carries them back in his injured hand to the room he’s being held captive, he is proud.

“Mischa, I have food for you.” His heart is glowing and he can smell the dried yolk on the outside of the shells. “First, I need to soak them in the hot water. I promise it won’t take long.”

He places the eggshells in the small bowl of lukewarm water, wanting to soften them for his sister, even though he knows it won’t do much.

“I’m hungry,” she breathes.

“I know, my beloved,” he whispers, using the pet name his mother often called her by. “We’ll pray to the angel to make it go faster.” Mischa nods and bows her head, placing her hands together. Hannibal spares a glance to the cold statue outside. “Beautiful angel who watches over the people of Lithuania, please aide us in our plight—“

“I’m hungry, angel,” Mischa interrupts.

“Please heat the water so that my sister Mischa can have something to eat. She’s very hungry.” Hannibal looks at his sister. “You must say ‘please’, Mischa.”

She opens her eyes to look up at the distant face of the angel. “Please?”

Pleased, Hannibal nods. “We pray this in the holy name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

“Amen,” she finishes.

“Amen.”

*****

He tears a page out of the back of the Bible in his hand. It’s from the Book of Revelations. He’s certain there’s something blasphemous about it and wonders what his proudly Catholic father would say. It’s been six days since the eggshells and his sister’s cheeks are gaunt, her eyes sunken. They’ve been living off various non-food items—wool from Mischa’s sweater, ashes from the fireplace, leather from an ink blotter—all heated in the pot of water he keeps going continuously.

“A great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars,” he murmurs then looks down at his little sister.

She turns her head away from him, her face scrunching up in frustration. She’s been very lethargic the past few days and she’s developed a cough.

“Mischa, this is all we have to eat,” he tells her gently.

“That’s not food.”

His chest feels tight. “Please, Mischa. It’s all we have.”

“Where’s Mama?” she mumbles in English.

“Mischa, we must be quiet.” He is listening to the phlegm in her lungs, smelling the illness on her breath. “Look. Look at our angel outside.”

“He’s watching over us,” she echoes from what he’s told her earlier.
“He’s going to protect us. The Angel of Our People.” He spares a glance to the night sky outside and a cruel smile passes over his lips. “Our people, Mischa. He won’t watch over the men trying to hurt us.”

“I want food.”

He can feel her ribs beneath her clothes. “I know.”

“Will you tell me a story?” Her breath is damp and he refuses to think of death.

“Once upon a time, there was a great sign that appeared in the heavens and all beheld a woman cloaked in the sun…”

*****

It’s the fourteenth day of being held in the embassy and Hannibal is taken downstairs to the room where the soldiers have formed their headquarters, a former conference room with no windows. Hannibal is quiet, observing his surroundings; it’s chaotic and disorganised, half of the furniture destroyed and burned in an attempt to keep warm during the night—the moulding on ceiling is black with soot. The men look hungry and impatient, their military uniforms hanging from their bodies. The leader is arguing with someone on a phone and Hannibal listens with interest. The leader is negotiating.

The phone is held out to him and the leader instructs, “Speak.”

He swallows hard and hoping Americans are the ones who are listening, speaks in English. “Hello, my name is Hannibal—“

The leader pulls the phone back and snarls, “That’s enough.”

“Mischa. She needs food. Please.” He isn’t polite because he’s supposed to be, but because he’s begging for her sake; if anyone is worth groveling for, it’s her.

But he’s led away without food, marched firmly to the room where he’s lived for the past two weeks. The room has a chill and Mischa is staring at him drowsily from the curtains they’ve been taking shelter in. She is doe-eyed and they glimmer like sheets of topaz. He is too ashamed to meet them, knowing how disappointed she will be when he confesses he’s brought her nothing to eat.

At sunset the door opens and Hannibal is filled with both hope and dread. He wants to see Americans that will take them away from this misery. He wants to hear that they can leave and return to their manor in Paris. But he has no such relief. Two of the soldiers march into the room straight towards them. Instinctively, Hannibal wraps his arms tighter around his beloved sister and just as he fears, they begin to pull her from his grasp.

“What do you want? Leave her alone!” he shouts.

A heavy fist hits him in the side of the head and he falls to the floor, stunned. As he reels from blow, he can hear his sister’s voice, though he can’t discern what she’s saying or what’s happening and what’s happening, why is she—

“Hannibal!” she screams.

He stumbles to his feet, trying to chase after the soldiers who are carrying his struggling sister out of the room. The door is slammed shut and barricaded, and he claws at the wood.
“Mischa!”

*****

It’s night time and Mischa hasn’t returned; earlier he’d heard the soldier stationed outside the room talking with another soldier in very animated tones and the one word he’d picked up on was ‘food’. He lies in front of the empty fireplace, shivering as he pulls the curtains tighter around himself. His stomach is twisting painfully and he hopes he can have something to eat. Surely the soldiers were given enough for him to eat as well—after all, if they don’t take care of their hostages, they have nothing to bargain with. If Mischa was gone and the soldiers now had food, it means their negotiations have gone well. Trading a hostage for food was very smart on the soldier’s part, perhaps the only smart thing they’ve done since taking over the embassy.

He smiles. Mischa must be warm and fed now, safe and possibly on her way back home to Paris or even America. He knows she’s most likely scared and confused, and his eyes water because the nurses or doctors caring for her cough won’t know that she needs to be sung to and praised for her manners, because she’s such an exceptional child.

He wonders how much longer he’ll be here.

He can hear the soldier cursing further away than his usual position outside the door, and taking the opportunity, Hannibal tries the door handle, opening it softly. Peeking his head out, he spots the soldier, who is at the end of the hallway, shouting something to the soldiers downstairs. Hannibal makes the split-second decision not to escape, but to steal the food that has been set down front of the door instead. He sticks his hand into the bowl and pulls out three large chunks of meat, shutting the door silently and returns to the fireplace.

The meat is cold, over cooked on the outside and undercooked on the inside, and is glazed on its corners with a sheen of grease. Hannibal stuffs the first chunk of meat into his mouth, nearly choking on it as he chews it with a feral need. It’s the best thing he’s ever tasted in his life because he’s had to face starvation for two weeks. His stomach lurches at the feeling of food for the first time in so long and he takes the second piece of meat, chewing it more thoroughly this time, allowing the fat to coat the inside of his mouth.

At the third, he pauses. In case Mischa wasn’t traded for this food and is still here in the embassy, she’s probably hungry. He wraps the final piece in what’s left of the Book of Revelations and tucks it in his pocket. The scent of the meat seems everywhere around him and he licks his fingers as he lies back in front of the fireplace, cloaking himself in the curtains the colour of the sun.

*****

START OF TRANSMISSION

“Good evening, America. I’m Walter Cronkite and this is the CBS Evening News for Thursday, November 29, 1973.

Tonight, we have an update on the fifteen day hostage crisis at the former American embassy in Lithuania, which has ended in tragedy. American forces were able to gain entrance to the compound at 3:34 pm Eastern Standard Time yesterday, which would have been 1:34 am today in Lithuania, killing all five of the soviet soldiers barricaded inside.

As we stated on out November 15th edition of the news, Ambassador Edvardas Lecter and his wife, Olimpia Lecter, were killed on the first day of the hostage situation, but due to the conflict, the US Marines were unable to retrieve their bodies until today. Tonight we have learned that Mischa Lecter,
the two year old daughter was killed as well, though there are no details on her cause of death. The only survivor is Hannibal, the Lecter’s eight year old son. We have confirmed that he evacuated to Paris where he shall receive medical treatment for malnutrition due to starvation, injuries to his hands, and a head wound sustained prior to his rescue.

We reached out to Robertas Lecter, the Ambassador’s brother, for a statement, but were declined.

It would appear that Lithuania is no longer safe for American diplomatic presence and President Nixon has declared that all Americans shall be withdrawn from countries with soviet presence until further notice.

Ambassador Lecter and his wife will be remembered for their tireless work to see the end of Soviet occupation in Eastern Europe. Their work began during the first year under the Kennedy administration, trying to obtain peace and democracy for the people under communist oppression. Even after President Kennedy’s death in ’73, they continued on their mission. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the Lecter family tonight and to Hannibal. May God have mercy on their souls.”

END OF TRANSMISSION

*****

Hannibal is nine when he first meets his “cousin” Bedelia Kennedy. He’s living with his uncle Robertas Lecter and aunt Lady Takako Murasaki at their summer home in Hyannis Port; he hasn’t spoken to anyone since Lithuania, and spends most of his days wandering around the large property, lost in memories of his beloved younger sister. Lady Murasaki is exceedingly patient with him and his uncle is spares no expense to buy him things that might pull him out of his depression—books, musical instruments, toys, even a bicycle.

Lady Murasaki’s adoptive family, the Kennedys, are exceptionally kind with him as well and he suspects it’s because of Lady Murasaki’s sister Rose, who is boarded in a home for people with mental health problems. It doesn’t bother him that they handle him like a fragile piece of china when they come over to visit on the weekends for the large parties they seem to thrive on; they’re not bad people—they’re just in the world of the living and he has no idea how to relate, so he locks himself in his uncle’s library and fixates on the leather bound books of war and fighting, hoping to find something, anything that will make sense to him.

And then quite suddenly one afternoon there is a girl his age standing in front of him, blocking his path between the roses and dahlias. Her small roseate lips look painted onto her porcelain face, her icy eyes empty and bottomless. Her blonde hair is cut in a fashionable bob and a white ribbon is tied to the left side. She’s dressed in a white pleated skirt and pale yellow knit top, looking incredibly refined compared to the other children he’s seen so far.

“Hello. My mother said I should ask you to play with me.” She smiles at him, her small hands clasped. “I’m having tea.”

He stares at her and she takes him by the hand, leading him through the garden gate the borders Lady Murasaki’s brother’s summer home. As he follows her, he considers breaking free of her hold and running back to his uncle’s house, but curiosity wins and he soon finds himself at a small wrought iron table and garden chairs. A tray with tea, cakes, and sandwiches has been set and he remembers his manners, pulling her chair out for her.

“Thank you,” she says politely and he sits in the chair across from her. “My name is Bedelia. My father is Aunt Missy’s brother.” She explains this as she places a white glacé petit four on his dessert plate. “You’re not a Kennedy, though. You’re a Lecter and your name is Hannibal.” She pauses.
before placing a blue petit four on her own plate. “Do you like Aunt Missy?” He realises she talking
about Lady Murasaki and he nods slowly, fingers playing nervously with his dessert fork. “Me, too.
She’s lots of fun. She’s going to teach me dressage. Do you know how to ride?” she asks curiously
as she pours something delicate smelling into his tea cup. He nods again and her china doll smile
never changes. “I love riding. Daddy bought me a horse that I named Caramel. She’s very beautiful
—I’ll take you to see her when I go to the stables next time. Can you speak French? I can.” He
shakes his head and she gives a resolute sigh. “Pity. I would like to practice French with someone
other than my tutor.”

Hannibal sits with her for hours, listening to her prattle on about nonsense and pouring tea which he
doesn’t touch, but he feels at ease with her as she doesn’t actually expect him to speak back. He
learns she’s the only child of Joseph Patrick Kennedy, Jr, his Uncle Robertas’ brother-in-law and
Senator of Maryland, the eldest sibling in the Kennedy dynasty; as a result she’s grown up with
obscene amounts of privilege and opportunity, spoilt because she was a child so desperately tried for.
Hannibal is drawn to her beauty, though. She makes him think of Mischa and he spends his time in
silence wondering how similar his sister would look at age nine to this cousin once removed. She’s
also very clever like him and despite himself, he is appreciative to meet someone who doesn’t expect
him to be a child. The topics of conversation that she picks are mostly self serving, but she seems to
be gathering information on him by his reactions, which is fine because he’s doing the exact same
thing.

Something about her strikes Hannibal as exceptionally wicked, an evil that only the wealthy seem to
manage, which is a surprise as he’s never seen any of their other family members act in any way
except compassionately. Bedelia seems very, very wrong. Finally after the exceptional amount of
silence, she confirms his suspicions. She folds her hands neatly in her lap and looks at him with an
expression that mimics friendliness but holds no actual warmth.

“Our family feels bad that yours is dead. They feel responsible because it was Uncle Jack who sent
your family there.” She tilts her head slightly, waiting for him to give her a reaction and her eyes
search his face. “They want you call them ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’ and ‘grandma’ and ‘grandpa’, because
they think that’s what you need.” Her eyes go to linger on their china and her voice takes on a weary
tone. “They see you as a fragile teacup, something that has to be kept on a shelf so no one handles it
with clumsy fingers. They don’t want to see you dropped and broken, so they keep you away from
strangers and are careful not to get to close to you. They pity you.” Her eyes return to his and he can
see that she has a firm, defined strength in her, overlooked by all but him. “But I don’t. I have no
pity.”

For the first time since arriving in America, he feels his lips begin to form a smile and in return her
smile broadens. She could see that he was someone who had been born with fire in his heart;
Mischa’s death didn’t make him this way—it was something that would simply refine the flames
within him, become the fuel for him to shape himself around. And isn’t that all anyone actually
wants? To be seen?

As the afternoon grows late, she finally brings the tea party to an end and she walks with him back
to his uncle’s house next door.

Hannibal finally speaks to her, breaking a ten month silence. “Why do you call Lady Murasaki,
‘Aunt Missy’?”

He’d never heard his uncle call her by that name and it seems so odd that a woman so refined would
be called by such a hideously common designation.

Bedelia doesn’t bat a lash at the fact he’s no longer mute. “It’s her nickname. My father said that
everyone in the family wanted her to feel included so they gave her an American name.”

Hannibal thinks that seems more excluding but says nothing. Who is he to judge how these people act? He can only hope they don’t try to give him a nickname as well. He lapses into silence again and she walks slower, staring at him curiously; she has a predatory way of watching, mirroring his own stare.

“Do you ever call her Aunt Takako?” she asks and he shakes his head, nearly smiling at such a ridiculous thought.

When they reach the side entrance to the palatial summer house he lives in, she tilts her head to imply inquisitiveness. “May I have tea with you tomorrow?”

He nods.

“I’ll have the kitchen make us sandwiches. Do you like watercress?”

He nods again and her smile broadens.

“I’ll come for you at eleven. We’ll sit on the veranda, so please dress accordingly.”

She turns and skips back to the gate; he watches her for a few moments before he senses eyes on him. He looks at the mudroom door and sees Lady Murasaki standing there. She smiles and waves at him, opening the door.

“Hannibal, did you have a nice time with Bedelia?” she asks; he thinks she has a beautiful accent.

He nods slowly and she gives him a knowing look, beckoning him to come with her to kitchen.

“Your uncle wants calf brains for dinner tonight. Let me show you how I cook them.”

He smiles and follows her.

*****

It’s evening and they play together down by the boat house in Boring, both ten years old and still side by side because they’re the only ones that can truly see one another. Bedelia’s smashing frog eggs and Hannibal is investigating the small animal footprints that lead from the boat house to the water’s edge. No doubt a rodent of some kind.

Setting down the rock she’s been using, Bedelia holds out her hand to him. “Let me show you our passage ways.”

He looks up from his pocket sketchbook. “Passage ways?”

She nods. “Daddy says the communists will come one day and we’ll be prepared. They go from the house to the outside.”

He takes her hand and together they walk to the fence, which they both crawl under; he fusses with cleaning their clothes for five minutes until she becomes angry and demands he come with her. In the forest that surrounds the property there is an unassuming pile of rocks that hides an entrance way which is sealed shut by a heavy door that requires both of them to open. The passageway smells of damp earth and Bedelia takes a small camping lantern hanging from a support beam and with a match from a book of matches in her pocket, she lights the lantern, illuminating the eerie underground space.
She looks like a ghost and when she begins to run down the passageway, giggling, he follows her without hesitation. He’ll always be chasing ghosts after all, eager to breath life into them. As they navigate the twists and turns, he maps out where they are on the property until they reach steps and a doorway that shoots off from the main tunnel.

“That’s to the boat house,” she tells him.

He nods and they run in a direction that can only lead them to Boring House. She gestures for him to be quiet and the passage leads to the interiors of the house’s walls, which would explain the odd proportions of certain rooms. They explore for hours and when they find the adults gathered in the smoking room, Bedelia suggests they eavesdrop and he nods, grinning.

Bedelia grumbles that she can’t hear what’s being said and Hannibal gestures for her to be quiet. The adults are speaking in hushed tones and it sounds as though someone is pouring drinks. His Uncle Joseph is first to speak.

“And how is Hannibal?”

“He’s well,” Lady Murasaki answers, her voice serene; he smiles, pleased that she sounds happy with his behaviour at home.

Aunt Athalia’s voice has a certain WASP drawl that he finds interesting and he reminds himself to practise it tonight. “We were so worried about him when he first came back home. How he went mute.”

“He’s had a hard time adjusting, but he seems to have found his footing,” his Uncle Joseph adds.

“And we’re very grateful that Bedelia has been able to keep him company. Olimipa and Edwardas always spoke of how close he was to Mischa. It’s like Bedelia can take her place,” his Uncle Robertas replies.

Hannibal frowns at this. Bedelia is definitely not his sister or a substitute for her. She’s a spoilt child who can keep secrets and amuses him. Mischa was a beautiful creature that belonged to him, someone heavenly and pure.

“It’s a shame about his sister though,” his Aunt Athalia continues in a soft reverence. “Poor child. The only thing they could send back to the states was her hair and some of the smaller bones they didn’t cook.”

Hannibal stumbles back against the opposite side of the tunnel, hands clasped over his mouth to cover up the sound he wants to make. No. Bedelia looks over to him, her brow crinkled and lips twisted into a frown.

“What’s wrong?” she hisses.

Hannibal can’t breath and ever silent, runs back through the maze of passage ways until he finds the exit upstairs that takes him towards the guest room he’s been staying in. Bedelia demands to know what’s upset him, but he can’t answer. Everything whirls about him like a kaleidoscope and he finds himself in his bathroom knelt over the toilet, ready to throw up.

“Hannibal, stop!” she tries to order him as he retches loudly.

She pleads until his stomach is empty, but he continues heaving. He can hear Bedelia running off shouting for her mother and he’s sobbing so hard that he can’t see a thing. How could this happen? The tiles beneath him are cold and hard, and he lets out an anguished howl at how greasy and warm
his mouth tastes, cooked meat in a broth, meat wrapped in pages of the bible.

Aunt Athalia and Lady Murasaki find him on the bathroom floor, shaking; they ask him what’s wrong and Bedelia’s standing on his bed, throwing an absolute tantrum in an attempt to get him to pay attention to her, her voice screaming and furious, but he’s retreated to his memory palace, running though the darkened hallways to find somewhere that can make him forget what he’s done to his baby sister.

*****

Hannibal spends the rest of the night throwing up so violently that Aunt Missy and Uncle Rob take him to the hospital. Bedelia lies awake in bed, wondering what could have upset him so much that he would get so sick. She hopes it’s not something he caught in the passages because she doesn’t want to get sick or have her parents find out that they were sneaking around in them. Unable to fall asleep, she sits on the floor and pulls her scrapbook out from under her bed, flipping through the pages. There are old paper clippings of her Uncle Jack and Aunt Jackie, cutouts of them from magazine pages, postcards with his face on it, letters she’s stolen from Daddy’s desk, a clipping of hair she’d taken when Aunt Jackie was asleep by the pool last summer.

They are so beautiful and happy in these photos—she deserves that, too. She’s grown up hearing about ‘Camelot’, the time period in which her family was in the White House and she can see from every picture and hear from ever loving word that it was perfect. Absolute power, absolute control, everything Kennedy and brilliant and roses.

Kneeling at her bedside, she begins to pray. “Uncle Jack, who art in Heaven, please grant Hannibal the strength to get better so that he doesn’t ruin my spring vacation. Hannibal is being so selfish right now—I never get to see him and there’s so much I still want to do.” She begins to pout, but the remembers that this is a prayer and she needs to add, “Please watch over my parents, Aunt Jackie and all my cousins. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.”

The next morning, Uncle Rob and Aunt Missy return to the house only long enough to collect their things; Hannibal sits in the backseat of their car, despondent. Bedelia tries to engage him in conversation, but he seems to have lost his voice again. It’s all so disappointing. She sits with him for a while before slipping one of her photos of Uncle Jack and Aunt Jackie into his hand.

“Pray to them. They’ll make you feel better,” she promises.

She gets no response and she firmly presses his fingers around it to make it clear he needs to take care of it. If he loses this photo just because he’s having a fit, she’s going to be furious.

Once a week she calls to his apartment, asking to talk to him, but Aunt Missy tells her every time that he’s not talking yet and she promises she’ll let Bedelia know when he does. She pesters her parents every day to take her to New York to see her cousin, but they treat her like a baby and say that Hannibal needs some space, needs some time alone. She doesn’t really think that’s fair, but there’s not much she can do about it. Her parents take her to visit Aunt Rosemary instead, which is a poor consolation. Aunt Rosemary’s favourite book once upon a time was ‘Winnie-the-Pooh’ and as Bedelia reads it to her (as she does every time she comes to visit) she says a silent prayer to her Uncle Jack to fix the problems that have been brought upon her. If Hannibal’s going to end up like Aunt Rosemary, she might as well just set the house on fire with herself in it, because life without him is so boring.

*****

“Does it hurt?” Bedelia croons, looking at his bandaged hands as she sits on the edge of his bed and
stirs a bowl of broth with a silver spoon.

“Yes, but it is bearable,” he assures her as he sits comfortably, resting back against down pillows.

Earlier that morning he had an operation with the best plastic surgeon in the nation to have his hands corrected cosmetically and to remove the metacarpal bones that formerly been attached to his little fingers. It’s 1978 and they’re both thirteen, having celebrated their birthdays jointly over the summer in Hyannis Port at the compound. Among his many lavish presents this year, he was told by his uncle that if he wanted, he could be fixed. He is eager to see himself perfected, to erase a disfigurement that reminds him of the ugliest time in his life. Bedelia has appointed herself to be his nurse; ever desperate to be around suffering, she had thrown a dramatic (and childish) fit the night before—threatening to starve herself if her parents didn’t allow her to stay over with him as he recovered from his surgery, which really wasn’t necessary; he had been given very good pain medication and he could still use the majority of both his hands. But Bedelia could ask for the sun and her father and mother would find a way to give her ownership of it. She’s been excused from her school for the week and is staying in the guest room across from him.

She holds his spoon to his lips and he opens his mouth, allowing her to feed him the broth.

“I hope they didn’t fuck anything up,” she whispers mournfully.

“The doctor is a very skilled man. He said that my hands will look normal. They simply will lack the empty joint ledge.”

She makes sad noise and brings another spoonful up to his lips. He drinks the broth in, pretending not to see Lady Murasaki watching from the doorway.

“You were fine the way you were. I don’t see why your uncle would agree to this.”

“They brought attention I didn’t like. Holding things was uncomfortable. I won’t miss the fifth metacarpal bone—well, the sixth metacarpal bone, in my case.”

“You’ll look like a freak.” She’s trying to hurt him, punish him altering her favourite toy—him.

“My hand will look thinner and my fingers unusually long, due to the proportion being distorted,” he offers, amused at how upset she is.

She turns her nose up at this. “Sick. We should have just had them cut off both of your hands. Spare us what they’ll look like now.”

Hannibal can see the way Lady Murasaki is looking at Bedelia is not an expression of affection. Their eyes meet and she drifts into the room, asking,

“Is everything all right in here?”

“Yes, Lady Murasaki.”

“Yes, Aunt Missy.”

Lady Murasaki comes to stand beside the bed, looking at the bowl of broth in her hand. “Bedelia, you know you don’t actually have to feed him.”

“Aunt Missy, Hannibal has gone through a very serious ordeal this morning. It wouldn’t be right of me to expect him to take care of himself on his own. He’s like a bird whose wings have been clipped. It’s like that doctor was pinioning him!” Bedelia insists.
“Bedelia, it’s nothing like that. Aren’t you happy for your cousin? This is something he’s wanted for a long time.”

“I do hate seeing you suffer, Hannibal,” Bedelia lies, placing one of her hands on his arm.

“I know you do,” he lies in return.

They smile at one another and Lady Murasaki leaves, seemingly satisfied that he is all right, but he can tell with her last gaze at his cousin, she no longer seems to trust Bedelia.

*****

In 1981, when Hannibal is sixteen, he is accepted to John Hopkins University as the youngest student in their history. To celebrate, Lady Murasaki takes him into the city to buy new suits, insisting that he deserves a better wardrobe to fit his accomplishments.

“Lady Murasaki, I appreciate this,” he says as he watches their driver carefully place the new garment bags and paper boxes from the tailor into the trunk of his uncle’s Bentley.

“We’re both so proud of you, Hannibal.” Her hand is resting in the bend of his elbow, leaning against him slightly.

He bows his head in humility. “It is all a result of the education that you and Uncle Robertas have given me.”

“I will have to call you ‘Doctor’ soon,” she teases.

“We are family. You would not have to be so formal with me, my lady,” he assures her. “Might we have lunch together in the city before we return home?”

She smiles and he holds the car door open for her. “That would be delightful, Hannibal.”

*****

“You hear that, Will?”

“Hmm?”

It’s 1981 and Will has just turned six. He’s curled up on the front seat of the pickup, rereading the fourth book in the Narnia series (his dad couldn’t find the third one in the town’s thrift store and told him to just skip ahead). They’re parked at a city park under a shady magnolia tree, the only relief they can find in the summer heat of Mississippi. A slight breeze pushes through the rolled down windows and Will is thankful the seats are upholstered in blanket instead of vinyl. The radio is on, Will’s dad playing the news during the lunch break.

“Put your brain to work and you could be like that Lecter kid,” his dad says as he circles ‘help wanted’ listings in the local newspaper.

“What did he do?” Will asks, though he doesn’t really care. He just wants to read and ignore the hunger in his stomach. They aren’t getting lunch today—they can only afford dinner.

His dad circles something, no doubt boat related. “Youngest student accepted to John Hopkins. You’re smart. That could be you in ten years.”

Will makes a face, but doesn’t look up from his story. “I don’t wanna be a doctor. I don’t wanna look at the insides of people.”
His dad snorts. “Well, then you can become a lawyer or dentist.”

Will looks up to his dad. “I want to fix boats like you—“

“No, you will not fix boats like me. You’re going to have a real nice job and a big bank account and a good house and car with air conditioning,” his dad snaps, pointing a finger at him firmly. “And you’re going to graduate from high school and go to college.”

Will knows better than to argue and turns his attention back to his book. Will’s dad’s eyes hold so much sadness it’s almost burning, like he’s got soap in his eyes. He learns at a young age—because of his dad—that eyes are not meant to be looked at, they’re to be avoided, because the last thing you’d ever want to see is someone’s soul.

*****

Hannibal stands over the beheaded butcher with one of the Murasaki clan’s swords, the blade dripping with blood. His body is singing with adrenaline and euphoria at what he’s done, every fibre of his being feeling connected to the sword in his hands. It’s summer and he’s in Hyannis Port, celebrating his last months before going to school. He’d caught the racist, bestial butcher in one of the secluded fishing spots and after taunting him, making him answer for the vulgar words he’d said about Lady Murasaki, he cuts off his head, breathing in heavily the scent of fresh spilt blood. Uncle Robertas is still in New York and is meant to join them in a few days and Hannibal’s been planning for this ever since arriving to the summer home. He’d just needed the patience to wait and hunt the man down—

“Hannibal!” He spins around and sees his aunt, her expression horrified. “What have you done?”

Hannibal isn’t at a loss for words, but he feels that it should be obvious why he’s done this for her. “He insulted you, my lady.”

She stares at the still body and then storms over to him, taking the sword out of his hands. “Get back to the house. NOW.”

She’s never raised her voice at him or spoken so coldly and he bows his head in subservience, leaving without looking back. He can hear her fretting and he quickens his pace to the house. There is no regret within him for bringing about the death of the butcher, but he hadn’t wanted to involve her. That night they dine on the fish the butcher had caught before Hannibal killed him.

The following morning the swords have been packed into a crate and are destined to be sent to the University of Georgia. Lady Murasaki doesn’t speak to him, her arms crossed as they watch the crate being loaded onto a delivery truck. As a peace offering, Hannibal cooks her dinner, sending the compound’s cook back to the main house.

“What if someone had seen you?” she finally says, her eyes hard.

“I would have killed them, too,” he says surely.

This seemed not to be the answer she had wanted to hear and he makes a note not to be so honest next time he discusses death with her.

“I…I didn’t ask for you to do that for me, Hannibal. I didn’t want you to do that for me.” Her voice is strained.

He frowns. “He said very ugly things about you. He deserved to be punished for it.”
“You cut off his head,” she replies and he can’t quite seem to see where he’s gone wrong.

“No one misses him.” He tries to lighten the mood and ease her worries. “The police have a mafia theory.”

“This is not funny.”

He hadn’t realised he was smiling and quickly gives himself a sombre appearance. “I didn’t mean to upset you, my lady. It was not my intention for you to find out.”

Uncharacteristically, she lets out a groan of frustration. He thinks it’s beautiful. “Hannibal, why would you think this to be an acceptable form of revenge?”

“I did it to honour you, my lady.” His chest is tight and the emotions within him are tumultuous. “I do not want this, Hannibal!” she cries and Hannibal bows his head, a rogue tear threatening to escape. Why won’t she just see that this was the nicest thing he could have done for her?

“I could not accept that he lived after what he said,” he says softly. She shakes her head, looking hurt and confused, so he attempts once more to clarify what his mindset had been. “My lady, I didn’t wish to upset you. I did it because I love you.”

She stands up from the table, slamming her hands down violently on the table and he flinches. “How could you say that? This is not love.”

“I don’t understand,” he admits; she has been his teacher for years—surely she can explain to him what it that he’s missing.

She taps at her breastbone then points an accusing finger at him. “You lack the little fingers. You have no grip on the sword.”

She storms away from the table, leaving him alone. He touches none of the food he’d cooked, instead throwing it away and going up to his room to self medicate on sodium thiopental and thoughts of Mischa.

*****

Bedelia’s cotillion present—a 1959 Mercedes-Benz 220S convertible in classic white, because Bedelia has excellent taste in cars—is parked off to the side of the private runway of Barnstable Municipal Airport; it had been delivered to Hyannis Port the afternoon before, the keys left in Hannibal’s care. He leans against the side of the car, watching the small private plane taxi down the runway; when it finally comes to a stop and the cabin door opens, the stairs unfold and his cousin stands in the doorway, covering her eyes to look for him. He holds up a hand to catch her attention and she smiles, running down the steps and across the runway to him.

“Hannibal!” she calls out excitedly and he can’t help but smile in return.

When she reaches him, he offers his hand out to her and pulls her in for an embrace. He’s been so lonely ever since Lady Murasaki expressed her anger to him.

“I have been counting the hours,” he tells her as she presses her lips to his cheek.

“Get me out of here. Mother is driving me nuts!” she hisses in his ear instead.

He smiles and opens the passenger door to her car for her. “Let me say hello to your parents and get
your bags.”

She puts her sunglasses on. “Make it quick, please.”

By the time he reaches the plane, the luggage has been taken off and his aunt and uncle have both disembarked. “Uncle Joseph, Aunt Athalia, I hope your trip was enjoyable?”

Uncle Joseph shakes his hand. “Hello, Hannibal. We did have a good trip. How has your summer been?”

“Warm,” he says neutrally.

Aunt Athalia removes her sunglasses from her purse. “Bedelia was going stir crazy on the plane—she’s been very impatient to see you.”

“My Uncle Robertas has allowed me permission to use his boat, which I believe is what she is most impatient to see.”

“We won’t keep the two of you, then.” She gives him a fond smile.

“Drive safely,” Uncle Joseph reminds him and as he takes Bedelia’s luggage with him, he nods.

“We shall see you this evening,” he says in parting.

Bedelia is waiting for him in the front seat and as they leave the airfield, she politely inquires. “How are Aunt Missy and Uncle Rob?”

“They’re well.” He’s not interested in talking about how tense things have been. Uncle Robertas has no idea what’s happened, but Lady Murasaki has been avoiding him, leaving him to go riding with Aunt Jacqueline at the stables. “I thought I might take you on a trip around Nantucket. We could have a picnic on the deck.”

“I have the wine.” She pulls a bottle out of her large beach tote.

He glances down at it before returning his eyes to the road. “It won’t compliment what I’ve cooked. We’ll save your bottle for later.”

There’s comfortable silence between them for a few minutes before Bedelia sighs dramatically. “I have a boyfriend. He’s boring.”

“I imagine. Sidwell doesn’t seem to harbor many actual intellectuals,” he says, simply to rile her.

“The place is rife with opportunity, though. I’ve almost guaranteed myself an internship at the senate when I graduate. I just need to get a bit higher up in the hierarchy.” She gives him a smug smile. “Blackmail is becoming my specialty.”

“How charming. Your grandfather creates the only group of politicians with morals and you manage to embody every quality they fear to associate with the Kennedy name.”

“Every family has their black sheep, Hannibal. They just don’t know it’s me yet. And I’m going to keep it that way.” She no longer pouts, but he knows enough of her body language to know she would. “I don’t know why you want to become a doctor. Is it because you like cutting things?”

“It requires discipline and it is what my Aunt and Uncle want for me.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Bending to others’ desires, Hannibal? That doesn’t sound like you.”
“Different, Bedelia. They want a career that provides a challenge for me and this is it.” He can’t imagine the boredom involved in politics. It’s all too messy.

“Why don’t you want your uncle’s business?” she asks instead.

He glances over at her. “Would you want to run a newspaper?”

She smirks, apparently agreeing that that would be inconceivably dull. “What are you going to do with the company when your uncle dies?”

It’s not anything he’s concerned about. “My aunt will take control of it.”

“Hannibal, get into politics with me,” she begs.

“And forfeit my work so far?”

She huffs and pulls the rearview mirror down so she can check her reflection before allowing him to correct it for safe driving.

“I heard that horrible butcher in town was found with his head cut off,” she says next. “He used to leer at me. He was such a pig.”

Hannibal likes this new topic of conversation. “He was. No one is mourning his loss.”

“I wonder who did it.”

“It’s difficult to say. The police have no leads from what I’ve heard in town.” He looks at her out of the corner of his eye. “Lady Murasaki is not happy with me.”

She seems surprised. “What did you do?”

Unable to keep his pride to himself, he admits, “I used her swords without permission.”

Bedelia’s smile becomes an uncomfortable leer and she strokes her fingers up his bare arm. She’s not stupid—she can hear what he hasn’t said. “You and I could run the world, you know.”

“This is our summer, Bedelia. We don’t need the world. We only need one another,” he swears.

She nods and sits closer to him. “Our summer of Camelot.”

*****

The boat rocks gently on the ocean and Hannibal sits on the floor of the cabin, his eyes staring at a knot on the floorboard. Bedelia’s breathing is as even as his own. The smell of her body, of his body, drown out the scent of the ocean.

He rarely makes mistakes, but when he does, he will be the first to admit it, because that is the first step in fixing it. But he isn’t at all sure how to ‘fix’ what he’s just done. Or if it needs to be fixed? No, Bedelia—who cultures so many odd feelings of loyalty and fondness—she has crossed a line in her manipulation of him. His mind runs through what has happened—wine, food, a soft hand on his temple…He will not punish her, but he will definitely make it clear that this was not an offense she could repeat. He has no desire to be a yet another conquest in her desire for absolute power. He pulls his swimming trunks back on and without saying anything else, exits the boat’s cabin. He finds the pack of cigarettes he’d left in his jacket’s pocket and lights one with a bit more aggression than usual. Oh, beautiful Bedelia.
The ocean laps at the boat, lulling the world around him as though he’s existing in a vacuum. Nothing else exists save for himself, the boat, and the water. He’s locked himself out of his memory palace, tucking the moment into an envelope and slipping it through the mail slot on the front door. He can collect it later when he’s sorted his thoughts out and place it wherever it needs to go—perhaps a file cabinet or in a post box beside the garden.

Bedelia emerges from the cabin ten minutes later, tying her hair back with a hair elastic. She looks as composed as she always does and stares out at the sea.

“I thought we might swim,” she finally announces.

He keeps his expression carefully neutral. “I’d like that.”

He checks the dropped anchor and he extinguishes the cigarette in a glass dish he’s kept solely for that purpose. She dives into the water, her body a white sliver that is engulfed by depth. He could drown her out here and no one would be the wiser. He can already picture himself sitting in Lady Murasaki’s living room, dripping wet with a blanket clinging around his shoulders as he sobs about trying to rescue her; Aunt Athalia and Uncle Joseph would hold one another and weep over their only child. The only question he can’t answer is whether he’d like to gut first, eating her liver with the Chianti she’d brought aboard for him, allowing her body to sink beneath the waves, or if he’d want to bring her back to shore, body cold and pale.

“What are you thinking about, Hannibal?”

He looks to his cousin bobbing on the surface of the ocean.

“You.”

She hums, her eyes drifting over him and he knows that she can see his thoughts; she sinks back beneath the surface of the water and as he watches the space she had been, wonders if she would like to drown. His hands clench for a moment and then he enters the water after her.

*****

As per tradition, Bedelia and Hannibal celebrate their birthdays together in a lavish party at the main house. Almost two hundred people show up—various socialites, classmates of Bedelia’s, fellow islanders, Kennedys—and as it’s rounding eleven, the party has just began to peak; there is dancing and celebration, people getting drunk and others pairing off for immature party games. Hannibal finds his cousin up on the balcony, watching the party down below; her eyes have the same amusement in them as one might find in a child stepping on ants.

“This night was perfect, wasn’t it?” she asks, pouring her warm champagne in the planter on the railing.

“It was.” He pulls a small jewellery box out of his trouser pocket. “I have your birthday present.”

“Oh?” She takes the Tiffany’s box and unwraps it, opening it up to reveal a silver chain with a small pearl on it. “Hannibal, this is beautiful.”

“I saw it in the window. It made me think of you.”

“Put it on me,” she commands and he does, not because she gave an order, but because it’s a silent claim of ownership. She looks at herself in the reflection of the french doors. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”
“I’m glad you like it.” He takes her by the hand, leading her back inside the house. “I have something else for you.”

She follows behind him, so easily lured into his wishes so long as he doesn’t raise his voice.

“You do?”

He gives her a wicked smile. “It’s waiting in your room.”

“I hope it’s not anything naughty.” Her hand reaches out to touch the front of his shirt. Before she can get too far with her attempts to undress him, he opens the guest bedroom he’d locked and reveals what he’s left lying on the bed.

“Only the finest for you, my dear,” he says as she stands agape.

It’s a senator whom is friends with her father, barely awake from the pills Hannibal had slipped into his drink, and there’s a camera with cartridges of film on the nightstand.

He stands behind her, unzipping the back of her dress as he purrs in her ear. “I know how badly you want that internship at the senate, so I thought I’d get it for you.”

“Oh, Hannibal.” She turns to him, her cheeks pink and eyes alight. “I love it.”

Her letter for the internship arrives by the end of the summer.

*****

Hannibal is in class, listening to a lecture on the alignment of vertebrae when he’s quietly pulled out, the president of John Hopkins himself waiting outside the door of the lecture; it is unexpected, but not a surprise. To the academic world around him, he is a quiet, tragic young man with manners and class, catered to due to his familial ties and wealth—if something important has happened, then only someone important would come for him. His heart rate rises momentarily at the thought he’s being taken somewhere private to be detained by law enforcement, but then he relaxes; if the president was afraid of his presence, he would be wearing the tension higher in his shoulders and Hannibal smells nothing amiss. No, this isn’t the hand of justice trying to get a solid grip on him—this is something else. The president takes him to his office and offers him a water and a seat; Hannibal wonders what has happened, suspects its a death and bites back irritation at his class time being cut into, but he continues playing the role expected of him—a seventeen year old who needs someone to hold his hand.

He hadn’t expected the deceased to be his Uncle Robertas, killed whist walking across Fifth by a cab driver trying to get his passenger up town quicker for a fifty dollar bonus.

He is informed kindly that he may excuse himself for the day, that his instructors will be informed of his absence and he nods, thanking the man for the school’s consideration. He returns to his private Baltimore apartment and finds his Uncle Joseph has left a message on the answering machine to call him back the moment he gets home. Hannibal fixes himself lunch—the thigh meat of an unfortunate police officer, not as tender as he had hoped despite the marinade—and looks over his mail as he enjoys the meal. There are a few letters from young women (and a young man) he’d met in Hyannis Port and Nantucket over the summer, all seeking correspondence with him and he relishes the juvenile attempts at courting him. None are worth his time, but the letters find their way into a desk drawer regardless, intending to string each one along to see what he can possibly get from each writer.

Next he calls the home phone in New York, but receives no answer, just the answering machine and
so he leaves a brief message to his aunt that he shall be returning to New York as soon as possible. Then he calls his Uncle Joseph’s office. The man’s voice is laden with worry over his emotional state (unnecessary), informing Hannibal that he’d been the one to call the university to have him given the bad news, and asks if his wife should come over to collect him. Hannibal quickly assures the senator that he is fine and will be headed home to New York shortly; it’s moments like these that he finds relief his aunt and uncle had wanted him to have a living space of his own, turning down the offer for him to live with Bedelia’s family.

He finally excuses himself, promising to call his uncle when he reaches New York, and puts on a record of jazz that his Uncle Robertas had bought for him one year as a gift; he doesn’t particularly like the music, but it seems to hold a certain flair now that his uncle can no longer enjoy it. As he begins to tidy his flat, he tries to understand what the man had enjoyed about it.

Uncle Robertas had been generous with his time and affection to Hannibal, but there had always been such an underlying sadness to the attention. He knew that he reminded him of his late brother, their visages strikingly similar, though he has his mother’s chestnut eyes, the ones that gleam red in the right light. Hannibal had been loathe at the thought Robertas might wish Hannibal to take the place of Edwardas—he had no desire to be anyone’s brother.

They did share a bond for art and it had been common for them to spend their evenings together sketching and painting and had spent many weekend afternoons traveling the region to look at museums and galleries. He pauses to look at the careful portrait that had been hung up in his apartment’s sitting room; every New Year’s Eve, Robertas would carefully sketch their trio and then paint it over with water colours, finishing not long after the ball dropped in Times Square. This particular painting had been made the year before last, when there hadn’t been any form of tension due to the butcher.

He doesn’t dwell on the watercolour any longer as his phone rings. He answers in hopes that Lady Murasaki has decided to return his call, but instead he is greeted with the sound of his Bedelia’s breathless and excited voice.

“How is Aunt Missy? Should she be alone?”

“I am going to leave for home tonight,” he informs her.

“I…”

Now it his turn to smile, knowing her incessant desire to watch the suffering of others. “You want to come?”

She sighs. “I don’t think I’ll be able to.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow and tell you everything.” He will find a series of convenient excuses not to do so.

Her voice becomes prim. “Thank you. That’s very considerate in your trying times.”
“Of course, Bedelia. We are family.” Politely, he plays his part. “Thank you for extending your sympathy. I will be sure to tell Lady Murasaki that you are thinking of her.”

“Yes, yes. It’s so sad. So sad,” she repeats, because those are the words that fit the situation.

“I must continue packing, so you’ll have to excuse my need to keep this brief.”

She wishes him a safe travel and he hangs up the phone.

*****

Hannibal arrives in New York to find that a few of Lady Murasaki’s family members have already arrived to comfort her; he hadn’t considered that they might be there and he stands in the foyer of the penthouse, staring blankly at Uncle Edward who’s standing there before him, saying something that from the tone must be apologetic and sympathetic. But he isn’t listening, too caught up in the feeling of jealousy that he isn’t going to be the one to sweep his dear aunt into his arms, to be her point of stability. He wants to be her only source of comfort, where she can turn to him and feel safe again—perhaps then she’ll understand why he had to kill the butcher.

“Hannibal.”

“I’m sorry,” Hannibal says automatically and Uncle Edward gives him a sad smile, no doubt thinking that he must be reverting back to his (intentional) muteness.

“Let me take your bags, son.”

Hannibal surrenders the luggage and watches as it’s carried off to his room. He checks his appearance in the foyer’s mirror and finding himself impeccable, he makes his way to the living room, where there is a low murmur of voices. Sitting on a sofa, surrounded by the handful of her sisters and nieces, is his beloved aunt.

“Lady Murasaki,” he greets softly.

She looks up and he feels his heart seize at the pain in her; her eyes are red and her body is hunched in on itself. “Hannibal.”

He begins to take a step forward, his instinct to fight the ills of the world for her overwhelming, but he worries she will see that and reject him. So he makes himself humble and glances at the women who seek to hold her sadness as their own.

“May I have a moment of privacy with my aunt?”

And the family scurries off, touching and loving the two of them before leaving them alone. Hannibal finds his place at his aunt’s side and takes her hands in his.

“My lady…” he isn’t sure what else to say and he trails off; he doesn’t like leaving anything unfinished, including his sentences, but this seems to be the right response for the head of the household and she turns to him, her eyes wet and grateful.

“Thank you for coming.” Her voice is tight though her eyes harbour none of the distain she’s shown him in the past year.

“Oh course. How are you? Has your family been tending to your needs?” These soft Kennedys can’t possibly understand how to handle a woman of her distinction—it should be him halting her tears.
“Yes. They have.” She looks up to him expectantly, trying to read his face. “How are you?”

“It is…” He is careful with his words, needing to look strong for her sake. “One does not ever expect to lose family.” He looks at her curiously. “I shall stay with you the rest of the week, if it would make you happy.”

“It would.”

Hannibal isn’t sure what compels him to do it, but he brings her hands to his lips, kissing her knuckles damp with tears. He can smell her sadness and he closes his eyes as he keeps his head lowered and brings her hands to rest against his chest, wanting to remind her that he has a heart and it is certainly affected by her happiness. If anyone one were to look, they would see him mourning, though this is actually a promise to her that he does in fact love her, despite what she believes about him and if she needs his tenderness rather than his wrath, he will do his best to give her that.

“Lady Murasaki, I can make the arrangements for Uncle Robertas if you are unable to.”

“Please.”

He can sense the others in their home hovering outside the living room, wishing to swoop back in and he decides to part from her, despite wanting to stay at her side. “I shall leave you with your family then.”

“Thank you, Hannibal.” And she manages to smile at him, immediately giving him a sense of relief.

“It is an honour to serve you in this matter.”

He stands from her side, releasing her hands and leaves the room.

*****

Bedelia arrives the next evening with her parents, her cheeks flushed the colour of the American Beauty that grow between their houses in Hyannis Port. She’s beaming, unable to make herself look sad and she takes his hands, making a semblance of a loving gesture.

“Hello,” she greets before folding him in her arms for a hug.

“We should probably be crying,” he murmurs into her ear, a generous reminder.

“Oh. Yes, you’re right.” The tears begin to fall and as her parents allow them a moment of privacy, she whispers, “Isn’t this wonderful? I didn’t think I’d see you again before Thanksgiving.”

He fights annoyance. “Bedelia, you’re not here for a social visit.”

“I know, it’s all so terrible. Just...terrible.” She releases him, tears running down her cheeks and pearly white smile intact. “Aunt Missy, I’m so sorry for your loss. Is there anything I can do for you?”

She skirts around him to Lady Murasaki and he heads to the kitchen, busying himself with coffee to pour for each family member. He needs to get away from the smothering of adults in this penthouse, all wanting to touch and make sad faces because that’s how humans deal with these matters. It reminds him of how he was handled upon arriving back to the states almost ten years ago, the kid gloves worn by those who think they can protect him from death and suffering, as though he knows nothing about causing either.
As he neatly arranges the cups of coffee on a serving tray with its small bowl of sugar and matching creamer, he decides he wants fresh air, to look at the sooty architecture of the city beneath overcast skies, to smell the world of inferiors that should rightly tremble and admire him. His home here in New York feels no different than a cage and as he can never allow himself to be denied freedom, he determines he will need to leave, if only so that he can catch his breath and pretend he has some sort of control over the situation.

Knowing that the adults will insist he have someone with him, he corners Bedelia after serving the coffee and asks, “Will you accompany me on a walk?”

She smiles and takes his hand.

And instead they fuck in the backseat of his uncle’s favourite Bentley, in the basement of the building’s parking garage. It was her idea, his American Beauty, her hair bouncing in full curls with sweater pulled up to frame her breasts, legs spread on either side of his hips as she tosses her head backwards and yells for her own pleasure. He hopes his fingers are leaving bruises on her thighs as he stares up at her and he tries to draw blood with his nails as he pulls her down on him hard, wanting her to scream for him instead—selfish bitch—but still finds the patience to locate her clitoris with his right thumb and bring her to orgasm so he can feel her tight muscles around him as he brings himself to climax.

She’s hungry for seconds and because they’re both so young, it takes no time for either to recover; he makes her lick his seed off his fingers as he pushes her back across the seat, letting her golden hair spill across the smooth buck-coloured leather; he could choke her, feel the life slipping from body and no one would ever know, but he wants to reform her, make her something even better—he can teach her to hide her smile, how to harness all her potential to be used at the expense of others. Her knees are held in the crooks of his elbows and she has the gall to tell him what she wants—he crushes his mouth to hers, wanting to steal all her oxygen away. She’s visiting for his benefit and he will have her remember that—he is not here for her amusement. But its physical contact and he loves her as much as he could possibly love a sociopath who has no true concern for him. There’s no comfort, but there is distraction and he is grateful for that.

Afterwards, they stand outside in the downpour for a minute to cool their flushed skin and to wash away any evidence of what they’ve done. He’s not satisfied until he can smell nothing of what has happened on either of them and they run back upstairs to the lobby to ride the elevator back to the penthouse.

*****

In the spring of 1984, when Hannibal is nineteen, he returns home to New York to see Lady Murasaki and discuss a matter he considers pressing. He sits beside his beautiful aunt, hands resting on his knees as he watches her considering the flowers she has arranged in Seika style. He thinks she looks regal, his eyes tracing over her face and neck. She’s holding a red spider lily, tilting her head from side to side as she studies the arrangement so far. He is patient because one must never talk during the practice of ikebana and once she has placed this final flower in the vase, he speaks.

“Lady Murasaki?”

Her eyes remain on the flowers. “Yes, Hannibal?”

“I was considering what the Uncle Robertas’ lawyers were saying about the newspaper.”

She turns to look at him. They so rarely make eye contact anymore, the week following his uncle’s death already forgotten.
“You wish to sell?”

He nods his head, lowering his eyes to suggest his submission to her, the mistress of the house. “I do not see either of us desiring to run the Gotham Tribune. With this money, you shall be allowed to maintain your current lifestyle comfortably.”

She bites her lips between her teeth for a moment and he tries to remain clinical in his desire to taste them—he doesn’t want to kiss her, he wants to know how they’d melt on his tongue after being seared in a pan of hot butter and delicate herbs from their garden.

“I think that would be a good idea. Shall I call the lawyers?”

“I am willing to contact them for you, my lady.”

She nods. “Thank you, Hannibal.”

He does love her deeply and seeing her happy is very satisfying to him. She’s his last connexion to the comfort of childhood and while he never thought of her as a mother, he does appreciate everything she’s ever taught him and the shelter she’s provided to him. He smiles to her, wishing that she had never found him standing over the body of the butcher, wishing that they could both be living without the emotional distance between the two of them. But he is forever grateful to her. The master that ever protects her warrior with no little fingers.

*****

“—that the Gotham Tribune will be sold by Count Robertas Lecter’s widow, Takako Kennedy Lecter, and his nephew, Hannibal Lecter. The final price for the newspaper reached a record high at —“

The pickup’s radio falls silents as Will’s dad pulls into the diner parking lot and shuts off the truck. He’s nine and out of school for the summer. As they both climb out the driver’s seat—the passenger side door is jammed from his dad sideswiping a tree while coming back from the bar a month ago—his dad tells him what he can order.

“You can have a cheeseburger, but no fries. You’ll split mine.” They have enough money to spend on eating out, but only enough.

“Okay.” As they walk into the diner, the bell above the door ringing cheerfully, Will asks, “Dad, will we be staying here long?”

They sit down at one of the booths and Will’s dad looks tired. “Do you like it here?”

“Yeah. They have a nice library.” Will really just wants to stay in one place for a while.

His dad’s lips quirk slightly and he slumps back against the padded vinyl. “I’ll see how long we can stay here.”

Menus are placed in front of them by a waitress with an ugly blonde perm.

“Will, what was that woman’s name? I always get it messed up,” he dad asks as he checks the prices of their lunch.

“Which one?”

“The one before I turned off the radio. The widow.”
“Takako Kennedy Lecter—” he recites.

His dad nods. “Takako! Right. I always get it mixed up with ‘Taco’ and ‘Tonto’ and—”

“Tonto is the Indian on Lone Ranger,” Will says judgmentally, unwrapping his fork and knife from the paper napkin marrying them together.

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I asked you.”

“Do you know her?” Will asks curiously.

“Nah, just know her from the news, that’s all.”

“Who is she?”

“Uh, let me see.” His father scratches his chin, fingernails against two day stubble. “She was adopted by the Kennedy family back in…uh, the forties when she got left behind here in America. Her parents were Japanese diplomats and when they bombed Pearl Harbour, they returned to Japan to try to put an end to the war and they left her behind with their friends the Kennedys. But Japan wanted war and so did we, so—” the waitress returns at this point and his dad quickly spouts out, “Two cheeseburgers, an order of fries, and two glasses of water.”

Her smile isn’t as sunny; she can recognise a cheap order and that means she’ll get a small tip. “That’ll be right up, boys.”

“Anyway, the Japanese emperor had her parents and the rest of her family executed as traitors and she was orphaned. Or at least that’s what I heard. So the Kennedys adopted her. It was a pretty big deal at the time. America’s favourite family taking in the enemy.”

“Did she hate America, too?” Will finds this fascinating.

“Probably hated Japan more for having her family killed.” Will’s dad shakes his head as Will pours himself a spoonful of white sugar. “Don’t eat that. We can split a piece of pie later.”

“A la mode?” he asks hopefully.

“Maybe.”

Will smiles; ice cream are usually only for his birthday.

“So she’s JFK’s sister?”

His dad nods again. “Yeah. Real pretty, too, if you like their kind. Her picture was in the newspaper a lot when she was younger and when she married Lecter—”

“Who’s he?” he interrupts.

“He owned the largest evening newspaper in New York City. He died last year,” his dad explains.

Will’s eyes dance over the table top before glancing up to his dad’s stubbly chin. “Walter Cronkite said that he was a count?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought they only had those in Europe.”
“He’s the son of an immigrant. Maybe they get to keep those titles when they move here. I don’t know. Look it up in the library tomorrow.” His dad unwraps his napkin of utensils. “Man, I bet that newspaper sold for a fortune.”

“They said it was a ‘record high’,” Will reminds him.

“Well, it’s not like his family was hurting for money.’”

“They were rich?” Will asks, feeling his own poorness keenly.

“Filthy.” His dad shrugs, an attempt not to be bitter about it. “They do good things with it, at least. And his nephew had already inherited his parents’ money.”

Will feels a pang of sadness. “They’re dead, too?”

“Yeah.” His dad smirks. “Don’t marry into the Kennedys. That family has more tragedy than you need.”

Will has no concern with this. “I’m going to marry a girl with a boat. And we’ll go sailing everywhere.”

His dad’s brow knots. “No, you’re going to marry someone smart that you meet in college so that the two of you have stable jobs and a good bank account.”

“Then we’ll buy a boat,” Will says defiantly. “The Kennedys have boats, don’t they?”

“Yeah, Willy. They have ‘The Honey Fitz’."

Will sneaks a spoonful of sugar into his glass of water. “I want a boat to sail on. I’d name her ‘The Fifolet’.”

His dad gives a soft laugh and nods. “I like that. Well, when you get that boat, you’ll have to call me up and we’ll take it out for fishing and beers.”

Will bristles slightly. He doesn’t exactly think a good time would include his dad drinking. But he doesn’t say that and instead forces a smile onto his face.

“Yeah. You’ll be the first person I call, Dad.”

*****

Will’s dad has just finished fixing the motors to a fleet of luxury boats for a very wealthy man in Mississippi before the Labor Day weekend and part of the payment has included the leftovers from a fancy party the man had thrown with his friends. Will is very excited to have something new and interesting to eat, instead of just rummaging around at the local stop-and-shop for bags of potato chips and prepackaged sandwiches. Foil wrapped paper plates, styrofoam containers, and sandwich baggies of food were spread out on the wobbly table in the motel room, ready for inspection by the Grahams.

Sliced vegetables (mostly radishes that had been cut into fancy shapes) and dips that probably needed to be thrown out (but Will was willing to chance); slices of somewhat stale dark bread and equally dry but greasy folds of salami (pungent, but Will hasn’t had a lunch meat other than bologna in years); a decent arrangement of crackers and small pretzels (which can be saved for their dinners); foil wrapped warm lox (maybe), warm cream cheese(no, won’t eat that), and somewhat squishy bagels (he’s had worse); and…Will frowns at a styrofoam container of a weird looking
brown…something that sits mushily in a mound.

“What is this?”

His dad looks up from a picked over chicken carcass wrapped in foil. “Pâté.”

Will makes a face. “Looks like cat food.”

His dad laughs. “These rich people—they eat the crappiest parts of the animal and think it’s great. So fancy to eat livers and brains and tongues.”

Will chokes a laugh, because that is pretty disgusting. “Does it taste good?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, probably. Hopefully. It’s what you have to take to school with you for the rest of the week.”

“Cat food sandwiches.” Will taste tests it and shrugs. “It’s not…bad. I just don’t want to look at it.”

This earns another laugh from his dad and he grins, careful not to make eye contact.

“Well, I’m going to work on this for my lunch.”

“Why do you get the chicken?” Will protests, but his words were broken with laughter.

“You’ll like it. You’ll get used to it,” his dad says, looking as though he’s trying to convince himself. As Will tries a radish, his dad pulls something else out of the backpack everything had been carried in. “Here’s the real prize, though.”

Will practically shouts at the sight of the twin soda cans his dad is holding. “Sundrop!”

“On for you, one for me.”

“Can we have it now?” Will asks hopefully.

His dad shrugs and gives the slightly awkward smile that Will recognises as his own. “Yeah, why not?”

They sit together on the step outside the motel room door, drinking the slightly warm sodas, silent companions. Someone is playing Led Zeppelin on the floor above them and Will taps his foot to beat.

“Cat food sandwiches,” his dad sings softly in time to the music and they both begin to laugh.

*****

Hannibal and Bedelia are both twenty-eight and still dine together every Sunday; Hannibal has announced over dinner that he’s been accepted to work for Doctors Without Borders as a surgeon and field medic. He wants her to be the first to know, the first to praise him for being ‘good’. His cousin accepts her role graciously but still manages to complain that he’s not working in Washington DC with her. When they’re in the kitchen together as he prepares their dessert for the night, she finally makes an announcement of her own.

“I’m getting married.”

He doesn’t glance up from his work. “Oh?”

“Benjamin Du Maurier,” she says simply.
He knows the name. “The judge.”

“Yes.”

He looks up from the small, unusually heart-shaped strawberry he’s cutting and placing on her plate. “Do you love him?”

“Daddy would have liked him,” she assures.

Hannibal knows that the Du Maurier family is incredibly wealthy. “He will take care of you.”

“Yes. And he will like you.” She smiles.

Hannibal nods, willing to play the expected role of a Supportive Family Member. Sometimes he wonders if that make him Bedelia’s best friend, which doesn’t sound right. God knows she’s not his.

“I need someone to give me away,” she says, tilting her head slightly.

“And you would like me to do the honours?” He hands her the dessert plate, small strawberry and chocolate sauce hearts decorating the surface around the three choux à la crème he’d made because they had been her childhood favourite.

She smears a finger through the chocolate sauce, bringing the tip of her finger to her mouth. “If it’s not an inconvenience.”

And so Hannibal walks Bedelia down the aisle at her wedding, both so beautiful that it elicits gasps from the attendees; his cousin is radiant, adorned in a dress of eggshell white lace and a cathedral length veil, looking as demure as the Blessed Virgin Mary painted on the high arcing ceiling; he’s dressed in a black suit and wears a silk tie that matches her dress.

As he sits beside his Aunt Athalia, holding her hand as she cries at her only child declaring her vow of devotion to the man beside her, until death do them part, he thinks about how he’d like to use the fatty jowls of the bishop for soup. It took a substantial donation to the church for the bishop to preform the wedding ceremony and Hannibal has his suspicions why; Du Maurier comes from a proud Sikh family and while Bedelia’s new husband converted to Catholicism for her, certain members of the clergy hadn’t exactly been thrilled.

After the wedding, there are photographers from local, national, and international that want photos of the new couple and of the extended family. And as he stands among the Kennedys that see him as a delicate teacup, a fragile piece of china, there are gentle teases, wondering when he’ll get as lucky as Bedelia and find someone to settle down with. His skin crawls as he smiles at them, hating the thought of having an anchor tied around his throat.

Of course no expense was spared for her wedding and Hannibal personally oversees the catering to the reception, ensuring only the finest ingredients are used. The cake is a large tiered affair, delivered from New York and assembled by Sylvia Weinstock herself; hundreds of small icing flowers decorate the surface, handcrafted and hand painted each. He lingers everywhere, monitoring and directing as that’s what he does best and the reception goes off without a hitch.

He is happy for his cousin in his own way. Benjamin will surely become a supreme court judge, he will be her anchor and her support. His bank account is large enough that he’ll always be able to afford her expensive tastes. They shall have a life together that many will envy and please both of their families, all she could ever want. She dances with Hannibal at the reception, both of them pretending that this is the greatest day of her life.
“Are you happy for me, Hannibal?” she asks, studying his eyes.

He lets her see nothing of his inner self. “Of course, Bedelia.”

She says nothing more because truly, there isn’t anything more that can be said between them. They’re no longer ‘the Twins’, they’re no longer the family’s children to be doted upon and spoiled. She’s married and he’s leaving for a war zone in the morning. He holds her a little closer, knowing that it’s illogical to think if this dance doesn’t end, this chapter in his life won’t have to end either. But the song does end and he places a delicate kiss on her cheek; as a new song begins, he allows the ebbing of the dancers to draw him away from her, and while their eyes stay locked on one another, he finally has to look away and exit from her life for the next two years.

*****

“In other news today, Bedelia Kennedy, daughter of the late Governor Joseph Kennedy, Jr., married Judge Benjamin Du Maurier in a Catholic ceremony at Washington DC’s Holy Trinity Catholic Church. She was walked down the aisle by her cousin—“

Will shuts off the radio as he slips his polyester graduation gown over his oversized Hawai’ian shirt, a Christmas gift that hangs from his lanky frame in deep red and bright orange; his slacks are new and pressed with the iron that had been in the motel room closet. It’s disgustingly humid today and he is grateful to have on short sleeves beneath. But his clothing is refusing to breathe and he knows he’ll be thoroughly sweaty and uncomfortable by the end of the evening.

“I don’t know where I placed the camera, Willy,” his dad mutters as he looks a second time behind the pillows of his motel bed.

Will wishes he had cut the tag off his shirt, but he’s simply too lazy to do anything about it now. “It’s in the glove compartment.”

His dad glances up at him. “Did I put it there?”

Will tugs at the shirt beneath the gown. “No, I did.”

“Oh, okay. Stay right there.” His dad leaves the room and Will sighs.

Under normal circumstances, Will does everything within his power to avoid having his photo taken —no one wants to look at a pimply, gangly teenager. But this afternoon Will isn’t worried—he’s seen enough of his dad’s pictures to know that this will be shaky and overall unusable, his face a blur that won’t mean anything. And he can pretend that it didn’t happen then, that he wasn’t graduating in a town he’d only been at for two months, that the teachers really didn’t know his name still and that he ate lunch alone every day—when he had a lunch to eat, that is.

His dad returns to the room, camera in hand.

“Put on the hat,” he suggests, waving a calloused hand at him.

Will rolls his eyes and places the mortarboard on his head.

His dad holds the disposable camera up to his eye, squinting as he takes the picture. “Okay. You want to stand beside the truck or—“

“I can stand by the truck.”

Will trudges outside to the motel parking lot, feeling like an absolute idiot for standing around to
have pictures taken of him. Will’s dad keeps cursing at his hands shaking the camera, insisting that he only needs to take one more. An older couple walking to their room smile at him, adding to Will’s embarrassment, but he says nothing, trying to force awkward smiles in his father’s direction. Finally, his father is done and motions for Will to get away from the passenger door, which he opens. Will frowns, watching his dad pull something out from behind the front seat where extra tools and parts are usually stored.

“I have something for you. Because you’ve done so good.” His dad hands over a present that’s actually been wrapped nicely, no doubt done in the store for an extra dollar. The paper is dark blue with a hunting motif on it and Will tears into it, feeling the book inside. It reveals itself to be ‘The Collected Works of Kahlil Gibran’, and Will has no idea who it is. His dad seems anxious when Will turns the book over to look at the back cover. “It’s uh, it’s for college. They’ll want you to read important books there and the gal at the bookstore said this was a very important book.”

“Thanks. It’s great.”

His dad begins to speak quickly and awkwardly. “I couldn’t get you a new quote book. They’re thirty bucks—“

Will looks up, smiling as he looks his dad’s eyebrows. “I don’t need a new quote book. I like this.”

“You’re a man now, Will. I’m—I’m—“ He claps his calloused hand firmly on Will’s shoulder rather than finish the sentence. “Well, we should probably get to the high school, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Will places the book back behind the front seat and his dad hands the disposable camera, no doubt wanting him to place it back in the glove compartment. A dark thought crosses Will’s mind and as he watches his dad walking around the front of the truck, Will drops the camera onto the pavement, kicking it under a car parked next to theirs, and shuts the door to the truck.

*****

1994 in Srebrenica, Bosnia is chaos and suffering. Hannibal is the head surgeon of the Médecins Sans Frontières relief team that has been assisting the refugees of the Bosnian War. It’s reaching a fever pitch, everyone waiting for what happens next. Srebrenica is supposed to be a zone free of conflict as dictated by the UN, but as can be expected in war, no one is abiding by that rule. There have been multiple shell strikes in the past few weeks and members of the Army of the Republika Srpska have been going missing in the middle of the night.

Well, the last part is something only Hannibal is aware of, considering he’s the reason they’re disappearing. He’s dressed head to toe in the dire grey city fatigues, the majority of his face concealed behind a black balaclava, revealing only his eyes. His boots—black polished leather—step silently though an alleyway in one of the living quarters of town, listening for Serb soldiers. He knows they’re out right now and his ears pick up on the sound of a muffled scream and the sound of a body hitting the floor, so he abruptly changes his course, running quietly towards the sound. He finds an apartment door ajar and pulling out his hunting knife, he enters the premises.

A soldier has a woman pinned beneath him and without a word, Hannibal grabs the man by the hair and yanks him back, his gloved fingers twisting tightly. The knife finds its mark easily, sliding up between ribs and twisting so that the blade hits his heart. Hannibal’s eyes flit over to the woman sitting in the ground; he can smell the blood and anguish from her body. The woman nods and adverts her eyes, allowing him to continue unimpeded. Hannibal quickly finishes the man, allowing him to crumple to the dusty floor of the small sitting room.
The Serb soldiers of the opposition have been pillaging parts of the city while the most vulnerable sleep, stealing food and weapons, raping and killing civilians. Hannibal has grown weary of the UN Peacekeepers, who haven’t been preventing the smaller massacres that have happened to the Muslim Bosniak population.

The woman is crying, her blouse torn open, and he motions for her to give him the quilt on the back of the couch; she does and he wraps the body up. There will be a blood stain on the floor, though if she cleans it tonight and puts a rug over it, no one will ever be any wiser. He carries the body down to the UN truck he’s borrowed to retrieve the boxes of rations from the food drop, stacking it atop the other body already there. He’s killed fifteen people in this city since he’s arrived, each one a learning exercise in efficiency and pain. This is the first time he’s ever had a witness to his harvest, but he doubts she has any intentions of reporting him.

Hannibal returns to the apartment and finds that the blood has been wiped up for the most part; he walks through the apartment, clearing it of any other offenders, the woman trailing behind him. Satisfied that he’s leaving the area with the only offender in question, he spots a crib in the bedroom and moves over to it; he can sense the woman behind him, her body coiled and ready to kill him lest he try to harm the child lying there. He can smell mucus and sweat—the child is possibly a year old and Hannibal leans over him, peeling off a glove to take the child’s pulse and temperature. Hannibal thinks he smells a possible ear infection—which has a bitter, damp odour.

“You son has a fever. You should bring him to the medical tent in the morning,” he instructs her in his very limited Bosnian.

She nods and when he takes a step forward to check the bleeding wound on her head, she offers herself submissively, apparently thinking he requires payment of some sort. He shakes his head, instead taking her’s between his hands to study the deep cut.

“I do not want anything from you.”

She looks unsure and he smiles, even though his mouth is covered. There’s a sweater hanging on the back of the bedroom door and he retrieves it, draping it around her shoulders, prompting her to cover herself with it. He checks the boy one more time before putting his glove back on and leaves the residence, eager to find a secluded space to butcher while the night is still young.

*****

Nearly everyone in Hannibal’s surgical team is Italian and as a result, Hannibal has the delight of speaking his mother’s tongue every day. It’s just past breakfast in the medical canteen and he’s sitting with the group of nurses who simply worship the ground he walks on. He’s eating rehydrated eggs that have small bits of diced meat added to it, three wheatmeal crackers in lieu of toast, and a cup of fruit that has far too much sugar for Hannibal’s taste.

“You must be exhausted,” a nurse named Patrizia coos, looking at him in utter adoration. “Driving all night to pick up the food rations after working all day. You should get some sleep. We’ll cover for you.”

Nurses Paola and Sergio nod enthusiastically.

Hannibal is unable to keep a smile off his face as he enjoys the taste of the free range rude he’s eating. “And if I am needed?”

“Hannibal, we shall get another doctor,” says Sergio. “And if we must get you, we will wake you.”
“Please, after all you’ve done. Getting the cooks over two hundred pounds of extra meat.” Paola’s
doe eyes look at him in wonder. “Hannibal, how do you always convince them to give you more
than we’re allotted?”

He thinks of the Serb army dwindling one by one. “I have a source. They’re very generous. They
support the cause.”

When he finishes his meal, he’s (affectionately) coerced to go to the sleeping barracks rather than
join them in the operating tent. “Get some sleep,” they tell him gently and he accepts the luxury of
extra rest. A full stomach and sharp knife under his pillow lulls him into dreams of America, where
there are plenty others awaiting his blade.

*****

It’s the winter of 1999, the eve of the Millennium, and Bedelia is sitting on the bottom step of the
staircase of her Washington DC townhouse, her hands to her mouth. She’s shaking and it’s not
because there’s a draft in this part of her home. Her cousin sits beside her and she feels his eyes
studying her face.

She withdraws her hands from her mouth and quietly says, “We will have to call the police soon.”

She meets his eyes and she sees too much in the depths of brown, eyes she thought she once knew.
“How…how did you convince him to do that?”

Her husband is lying on the floor of the foyer, dead. He’d come home, ranting and not himself,
experiencing a psychotic break. She’d tried to calm him and prove he was safe in their townhouse
and hadn’t he been taking his medication, baby, what’s wrong, just tell me and I’ll fix it—then his
hands had been around her throat and he’d been spitting accusations that didn’t make any sense.
She’d clawed at him—careful not to hurt his lovely face—but fighting for her life and then suddenly
there was a commanding, familiar voice behind them. Bedelia hadn’t really listened to what was
being said but finally Ben’s head tipped back and his grip loosened on her throat until she fell to the
floor, gasping for air as her head spun. Ben had fallen backwards, gagging and making the most
horrible noises as he convulsed on the cherrywood hard floors—

Her cousin’s large hands come up to her throat and tilt her chin up gently, studying the bruises she’s
assuming are beginning to show at this point.

“How is your throat?” he asks clinically.

“It hurts.” His fingers probe at her tender skin, but she feels detached from her own mortal pain.
“You shouldn’t be here when the police come.”

“I know.”

She looks back towards her husband. From here she can see one of his outstretched hands from
behind an armchair. “He was going to kill me, wasn’t he?”

“Most likely.”

Bedelia knows she’d never be able to prove it, but there is no doubt in her mind that Hannibal had
something to do with what has happened here tonight, that he is the reason her husband attacked her.
Benjamin has a small mental ‘imbalance’ as they’d referred to it, something that could easily be
treated with the proper medication, which they received from Hannibal, who has his physician’s
license. She says nothing about her alarm that he managed to show up at just the right moment to
save her, that he wasn’t even supposed to be there, but she supposes that is a detail she can forget
about and overlook for now.

He stands up and retrieves her cordless, pressing it into her hands before leaving as quietly as he came. Bedelia sits on the steps a little longer, unsure if she’s allowing him time to get away or if she’s going to tell the police exactly who was responsible for what happened here this evening.

*****

Will is in a bar, far too early in the morning to really have any good business there, but he’s just found the house of his dreams in Wolf Trap, Virginia and just secured an official (part time) teaching position at GWU, that will count towards his graduation. Things are looking up for him for the first time in his life and he is happy that at twenty-four, he finally has a sense of stability. He’s celebrating with hot pastrami on rye that’s actually pretty good for bar food and drinking a watery beer, enjoying the silence of being the only patron there.

The bartender is drying beer glasses with a towel and nods his head up to the tv above the bar. “You hear about that?”

Will glances up and sees the face of the Honourable Benjamin Singh Du Maurier on the screen. “I did.”

The bartender finds the remote and unmutes the tv, allowing the news to play throughout the empty bar. Will doesn’t particularly want to hear about the story, but as is human nature, he is curious.

“—schizophrenia, a secret he kept from everyone but his immediate family. Senator Bedelia Du Maurier spoke out for the first time since her husband’s death this morning on Capitol Hill.”

The screen cuts to a scene before the Capitol Building in Washington. A beautiful woman stands in front of a podium, surrounded by typical political entourage, her uncle Senator Ted Kennedy standing at her side with a very aggressive stance, challenging any of the reporters to upset his niece. She’s dressed in black—still in mourning, no doubt—her clothes an expensive cut and material, a chic widow.

Grease and juice from the sandwich run down the side of his chin and he tries to wipe it off before it drips onto the countertop.

“I’m heartbroken by Ben’s death. He was a wonderful man, but very troubled. I tried to help him as much as I could, but even with love there is only so much one can do.”

Du Maurier’s voice is a clean sound, yet rich and luxurious, rolling her words delicately in her mouth as though anything she says is a hard candy worthy of being savoured, that all syllables sound sweet from her tongue. It’s a politician’s trick and Will instinctively bristles; this is the kind of thing people try to get him to explain as part of his ‘process’, but he can’t because it’s impossible to spot on its own. She has a thousand splinters wedged inside of him instantly and he can feel every single one of them, because that’s how politicians feel inside of him—broken and awful shards of glass and kindling that cut and cause him to catch on fire.

“I am so thankful for everyone’s thoughts and prayers not just for myself, but for Ben’s parents. Now is the time to talk about my Uncle Jack’s plan for mental health care reform. I hope the dialogue can be started on the Hill with my colleagues soon.” She pauses, a slight hitch in her voice that hints at tears being held back. “Thank you so much. God bless the United States.”

*****

Bedelia is with Hannibal, celebrating her first election to the Senate since becoming a widow, just the
two of them in his very, very empty house. A private dinner for two and it appears he’s spared no
detail for her—the place settings are brand new, the flowers are extravagant, the air is perfumed from
the burning candles, and the wine is expensive.

“Hare wellington with autumn berries, tomato, and sugared violets with a wine sauce,” he presents,
setting the plate in front of her.

She smiles down at the food, noting the exquisite arrangement of tomatoes sliced to look like roses,
surrounded by small raspberries, blackberries, and sugared violets so it looks as though there is a
bouquet of flowers on the top quarter of her plate; there is also a delicate filigree of complementing
red wine sauce decorating the plate around the perfectly cooked medallions of game.

“Thank you once again, Hannibal. My campaign manager felt it would be in very poor taste if I were
to throw a large celebratory party in light of recent events. Though your cooking has always been a
treat I’m most fond of.”

She thinks of how Josias Fendall, the Republican who’d run against her in the election and lost, had
been found this morning with his tongue missing and body torn open in an alleyway, apparently the
victim of the Chesapeake Ripper. She doesn’t miss him in the slightest and because he was killed
after the election two days ago, she is not considered a serious suspect, which is a relief. Hannibal
sits down at the table across from her, no doubt so he can stare at that garish painting of Leda and the
Swan behind her while they eat.

“My pleasure, dearest cousin. I’m sorry your opposition’s death has put a damper on your own life.”

“It’s a pity he couldn’t join us so I could see his face,” she teases as she starts to cut into the tender
hare on her plate. “I think triumph always makes a dish taste that much better.”

“He always reminded me of a rabbit,” he adds with equal humour.

She chuckles softly as she prepares to take a bite, then she pauses, looking at the meat, then back up
at him. His smile transforms from friendly to blood curdling as though he’s told a joke that he’s been
waiting years for her to understand.

“I hope this wasn’t too much trouble to prepare,” she says hoarsely, swallowing hard as she looks
back at the meat.

“Never when it involves you, Bedelia.”

She forces her smile back on her face and then allows her face to soften before eating what’s on her
fork. Hannibal gives her a pleased look and starts to eat as well.

“It’s delicious,” she whispers, bile in the back of her throat.

Hannibal gives her the proudest look she’s ever seen and he raises his wine glass. “To triumph.”

***///***

Hannibal is thirty-six when the world shifts slightly and falls into place, the smooth and sharp teeth of
the gears aligning finally. Firstly, he accepts a night shift at the clinic, something he never does, but
he’s certain that one of the nurses is stealing tranquillisers and plans to confirm his suspicions.
Secondly, he’s broken his ceramic thermos and as he hasn’t had time to replace it, he is forced to go
to the hospital canteen to get hot water for his tea, a section of the clinic he tries to avoid. And lastly,
he’s not killed anyone in months and the desire to do so has been growing strong. Three things that
all seem unrelated and mostly unimportant to him, but when he looks back, he’ll see that they’d
always be intertwined.

Which means at slightly after ten o’clock at night on April 29th, 2001 he finds himself walking back from the canteen to the lobby with a cup of hot water in his hand, not at home reading a book and drinking a glass of port before bed. There’s a commotion in the lobby, the sounds of screaming and panic and pleading, and he sets his cup of water down on an alcove, not wanting to spill it as he deals with the situation; how dare someone bring disorder into his clinic.

Hannibal is curious as patients and nurses go running past him in fear and as he wonders where the clinic’s security is (they’d better be dead, because he going to have all of them fired for allowing anything to escalate to this level) he rounds the corner to see he’s standing behind a man who has a young girl in front of him, a knife to her throat. One of the young nurses, Sadie, is bravely trying to talk the man down, but she’s terrified and crying as she pleads with him to ‘Please put down the knife!’

Hannibal evaluates the situation: the man has a wall to his back, but not enough that Hannibal can’t slip behind him and—he sees the bright red box mounted to the wall that says ‘Emergency Use Only’—and his build is wiry, muscles of a hunter and not a brute. His clothing is that of a blue collar worker, but clean and the child is whimpering and begging softly, “Please don’t kill me, please don’t kill me, please don’t kill me.”

Hannibal is wearing his loafers and the polished floor is linoleum, which doesn’t allow for too much silence. But that just makes this a challenge and Hannibal likes to improve upon himself. Nurse Sadie is distracted by the knife, not giving away his position or his presence. Quietly he steps between the row of waiting room chairs and the stranger with the knife; he knows he only has one chance to kill this man (such a rare treat to commit in public view!), only one opportunity to strike him so he can claim the death is unintentional and his heart beat increases by one, the thrill of a new game.

Hannibal reaches for the ‘Emergency Use Only’ box mounted on the wall, throwing the door open and grabbing the fire extinguisher out. Just as the man begins to drag the blade across the girl’s throat, Hannibal swings around and brings the fire extinguisher down on the man's head, everything happening too fast and yet moving in slow motion. There is a breathtaking crack as the man’s skull is broken by the force and he crumples to the polished tiles. Hannibal—finding the time to fix his tie as he kneels over the girl—looks into bright blue eyes. The child’s mouth is opening and closing as his hand cups over her open throat, though not truly covering the bleeding gash.

Nurse Sadie is screaming hysterically and it appears security has just arrived, judging by the sound of heavy shoes on the linoleum. But Hannibal is lost to the world, all focus on the spreading pool of her blood that he’s knelt in and the eyes he’s staring into. The nameless child doesn't flail and as he considers her death, he sees the flames of a fireplace, of snow falling from a dark Lithuanian sky, of the small quantum strings that cover the universe, tangling from her blood around his fingers. Mischa. Her breath comes in quick gasps, the sounds of someone dying, and he finally applies pressure to her neck, feeling the blood quell against his palm, cupping his other hand under her neck. As he holds the girl’s life in his hands, he calmly directs the nurses who’ve gathered in a panic.

“Please alert the police that there has been an attempted homicide and subsequent death. Contact the ambulance services that we will be unable to accept any major traumatic injuries. Close off this section of the lobby so that the police do not have a contaminated crime scene.” He keeps his hand over the child’s neck as he allows the nurses to get her bandaged up and onto a gurney. “Prep OR-Three, please. Do not touch the body.”

The dead man lying behind him is being given a wide berth and he knows that later on, his unflappable demeanour will be attributed to the fact he’s worked in an actual war zones and that he’s
simply able to compartmentalise terrible things as he’s expected to do. And as they wheel the young girl at a running pace to the operating room and Hannibal feels her breathing stop and pulse drop, Hannibal finds himself smiling because this is just death and death is nothing to him. He looks over this child’s still and warm form—there might be space in this world for Mischa yet.

*****

“Did you hear about that attack last night?” the man at the corner gas station asks.

“No,” Will says absently as he stuffs the change into his wallet. He has no appetite for violence.

“Over in Baltimore? Some guy tried to slit his daughter’s throat in a hospital lobby but a doctor intervened.”

Will says nothing, waiting for his burrito in the microwave behind the counter to finish.

“She almost died,” the cashier continues. “Five years old.”

Will cringes, trying not to imagine anything, which is an impossible task. The microwave dings and he hastily accepts the burrito, returning to his station wagon parked outside. It’s raining outside, miserable spring weather, and he sits behind the steering wheel as he stuffs his mouth. He’s nearly finished when he sees something moving by the dumpster beside the gas station building. It’s a dog, matted and wet. His brain disconnects from horrible thoughts.

“Hello.” He moves slowly, offering out what’s left of the burrito. “You look hungry.”

The dog whines, scared of being hurt again.

“It’s okay. I don’t want to hurt you.” Will keeps his voice gentle. “I know how you feel. It’s pretty cold out here. Would you like to come home with me?”

The dog’s tail starts to wag and Will sees something that causes his stomach to clench. There are very old burn marks along the right flank of the dog—gasoline, lighter fluid, that’s not from boiling water—and he accidentally drops the burrito onto the wet pavement. “Oh, jeez.”

The dog takes a step back, now unsure of Will’s body language and Will forces himself to relax. “Yeah, you’re all right. It’s okay. Let’s get somewhere warm.”

He coaxes the dog into the back of his station wagon, hoping that he won’t panic at the drive. But the dog is a good one, just abused, and rides in the back space with only a few whimpers and the smell of wet fur. Will’s just finalised the purchase of his home in secluded Wolf Trap, Virginia; the last candidate he’d worked for had won the governorship of Maryland; he was a very, very wealthy man—filthy, fucking rich—and had given Will a sizable bonus in the six figure range. Will hadn’t particularly liked the man, but the pay had been very good and he’d been allowed to work out of his apartment in DC. And now the fruits of his labour had come in the form of money.

“This is my new house,” he announces with shy pride. “I, uh, I just bought it. So there’ll be plenty of room to run around.” The fields that surround the house would be a paradise to a dog. “I’m Will, by the way.” He smiles then realises he’s introducing himself to a dog. Oh well. “You look like a Beau. I’ll call you that, okay?”

Beau gives no reply, which Will takes as acceptance.

“Here we are.” He motions for the dog to stay on the porch. “You stay right here and I’m going to get you something to eat.”
Will hasn’t been grocery shopping because being in a strange store still gives him anxiety, so all he has for a dog to eat is slices of bologna and a leftover container of KFC mashed potatoes, both of which he decides to microwave on a paper plate for the dog outside. Beau is still waiting for him and stands up when Will opens the door.

“They’re okay reheated, I think.” He smiles as the dog begins to eat the food ravenously. “Yeah, you’re just hungry.”

He spends the rest of the afternoon washing the dog and grooming him, evaluating him for any current injuries but finds none. He determines that Beau is indeed housebroken and not scared of the loud thunder accompanying the storm, but he does seem frightened by the tools around the boat motor Will had found at the local dump, so he tucks everything away in a closet. Once Beau is settled comfortably in the house, Will drives back to Washington DC to shop at the grocery store and a pet store for supplies.

He returns home to bond with his new project. Beau.

*****

Hannibal sits vigil beside the child’s bed, holding her hand as he listening to the rhythm of the machines keeping her alive. She had survived the surgery, resurrected by his own hands. The police had waited patiently until he had finished the surgery to question him; he’d appeared very shaken and had collapsed in a chair in the waiting room, watery eyes and soft voice. His performance has caused two nurses to cry and even one of the police officers had looked very moved, gently touching his shoulder as he assured him that they would get to the bottom of this mess. He’d tearfully asked about the child, this Abigail. They’d told him that they were still trying to find family for her and he’d quickly taken advantage of their own pity, stating his desire to watch over her. Lecters get what Lecters want and she belongs to him now.

As the head of the clinic, he’s able to get her a private room, and he revels in their closeness. Her hand looked so small in his, fragile and warm. He hasn’t held anyone’s hand for his own pleasure in…decades. It’s a nice change.

A nurse—a young student from the community college—walks in with a tray from the cafeteria. He smiles at Hannibal, the pitying smile all nurses deliver to people in the hospital rooms.

“I thought you might like lunch. Barbara told me you hadn’t had anything to eat today,” the young man says kindly, setting the tray down on the pressed wood table beside Hannibal’s chair.

“Thank you, Tony,” Hannibal replies politely, watching the nurse like a hawk as he goes over to the machines stationed around the bedside.

Tony looks over the girl’s resting face and asks curiously. “How’s she doing?”

“Still resting. She's had a very long night.” Hannibal is proud that she fought to live.

The nurse turns to look at Hannibal, his voice lower. “You okay?”

Hannibal nods once, ever the stoic doctor that everyone in the clinic looks up to. “I am fine. Thank you.”

The young man gently squeezes Hannibal’s shoulder. “Lemme know if you need anything else.”

Hannibal feigns gratitude. “I will.”
Alone once more with the small child, Hannibal feels venturesome, taking a bite of the sandwich and restrains himself from making a face at the unpleasant state of the turkey and mustard on the white bread. As he chews the food, he places the sandwich back on the tray and moves it aside.

“My mother always told me to try new things. Perhaps I was too adventurous. When you wake up I shall have better food waiting for you,” he promises the young child.

*****

Bedelia, in an outfit that would suggest she’d been up to something casual when she’d rushed over to check up on her cousin, smiles in absolute relief that nothing has happened to Hannibal’s face. It is far too beautiful to deserve any damage, especially if she was to use it for her greatest political scheme to date. Honestly, though—couldn’t Hannibal ever stay out of trouble?

“I ordered a change of clothes for you from your tailor’s,” she informs him as she offers the bag containing something clean and well sewn.

“Thank you, Bedelia. It's much appreciated.” He sets the bag down and even if they’re not as close as they used to be, they can still read each other’s body language as if it’s their own.

They move into a quick embrace, something that mimics what a family members might do out of love and comfort. She’s missed playing pretend with him.

“It would be helpful if you cry a little,” she whispers into his ear.

“Of course.”

He looks over at the room where the girl resides and when he turns back to Bedelia, his eyes glisten with tears that wish to fall. He embraces her tightly again and she spots young Freddie Lounds taking pictures of them, which is fine, because she gave the tabloid journalist the tip she’d be there after all. This photo will dominate the front page of the local newspapers, ‘Senator Du Maurier comforts cousin after horrific hospital slashing’. It will also make the national news, which is even better. The more people see Hannibal’s face in the next few months, the better.

“And how are you?” she asks when they finally pull away.

Hannibal smiles in a manner she deems rather handsome. “She will survive.”

Bedelia smiles; yes, that will look even better in the papers. A tragic, living victim to be sported around, amplifying the fact Hannibal is a Hero and Good Man. How wonderful.

“It’s so sad. So, so sad,” she insists, knowing that the words don’t sound sincere at all, but at least she’s trying.

“Shall we speak somewhere private?” he asks, tipping his head in the direction of the hospital room.

She nods, linking her arm in his and leaning against him slightly. He retrieves the bag she’s brought for him and leads her to the private room. She wants Lounds to catch this, too. She wants her cousin seen as an anchor, her pillar of strength. She wants a family bond to be seen. It takes all of her self-discipline not to look back and grin. ‘Cry now, Bee,’ she thinks to herself. ‘And smile later.’

*****

Bedelia enters the private hospital room with a large bouquet of flowers, most likely at the suggestion of Alana. “Hannibal, how are you?”
He accepts her with a quick kiss on the cheek and places her flowers beside Abigail’s bedside. The clinic has been receiving flowers and balloons nonstop from people across the country and Hannibal ordered that all of them be redistributed to other patients rooms. Everyone murmurs at how thoughtful he is, but really its because he doesn’t want cheap flowers and tacky balloons in Abigail’s room. At least Bedelia picked out something with taste.

“I’m fine. Thank you for coming.”

“Of course. This is a good photo op for me.” She sits down on the arm rest of his chair, not truly placing her balance there, but keeping it on her feet. He’s sure she looks elegant to anyone walking past. “I need to talk to you about Mr Hobbs.”

“I was protecting Abigail,” he says quickly and she smiles at him, an eyebrow raised.

“State troopers have been to his hunting cabin by the Frederick Municipal Forest. They’ve found human remains.”

“The missing Mrs Hobbs?” he asks, hopeful of the woman’s death.

She shakes her head, smile broadening in amusement as he understands what she’s saying.

“He was killing people in his cabin?” he asks, not terribly surprised—the man had tried to kill his daughter in a hospital, after all.

“It would seem that way. They’ve managed to make DNA matches to two missing men so far. The thing is…they’re not finding much in terms of the remains. Hair, teeth…” Her smile disappears and she tilts her head in a manner that implies absolute ignorance. “How does one disappear a full grown man, Hannibal? That’s an awful lot of meat to hide…”

Something is tight in his chest. “Do you believe in fate, dearest cousin?”

Her eyes lock onto his, a sharp gaze to hold. “Do you feel she is fated to be here, Hannibal?”

“A daughter brought before me. I have taken him out of her life and now she needs someone to take his place.” It almost seems poetic to him.

“Is her life important?” He sees that she truly can’t tell whether or not it is.

“I know what life means,” he says simply. “We’ve existed for a hundred thousand years. In that time, a hundred billion human lives have had beginnings and ends.”

“A hundred billion lives haven’t impacted yours. Clearly Abigail Hobbs’ life has and you seem surprised by that.”

He returns his attention to the little girl. “I never considered having a child. But after meeting Abigail. I understand the appeal. The opportunity to guide and support, and in many ways, direct a life.”

A long term, grand scale project he never imagined getting to have. It seems almost unfathomable and when dangled before him, he can’t say no.

Bedelia’s eyes linger on the heavy dressing around the child’s small throat. “You are having an influence on her.”

He thinks of killing Hobbs with the same hands he used to stop her bleeding. “I was hoping I was.”

“Do you feel that choice would be wise?”
“Parenthood is never wise, Bedelia.”

“Would you like her?” Bedelia’s voice and smile are unbelievably condescending, but he is willing to forgive her—he would be unable to help himself were he in her place.

“Yes.”

“I can pull some strings for you. But only if you promise to be responsible for her.”

She uses the same voice she might use to say, ‘please mind the bone china, Hannibal’.

“I feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility and obligation to her,” he tells her softly and he means every word of it.

“Then you shall have her, Hannibal. What a Lecter wants, a Lecter gets.” She pats his hand as though she’s gifting a small treasure to him.

Hannibal smiles at his cousin, implying gratefulness, and by the end of the following week, he’s been granted temporary guardianship over the young girl. He knows it has come at a price—no dealings with Bedelia are free—but when Abigail opens her eyes and he’s the first thing she sees, he finds that he doesn’t care.

*****

Bedelia watches her cousin’s face as he keeps returning his gaze to the child sitting in the bed, her small fingers flipping through a National Geographic magazine, studying pictures of wolves in Yellowstone. He’s always been prone to odd fascinations, but this one seems the strangest and most deep. He sees something she cannot and that bothers her.

Hannibal begins to whistle a soft song and the little girl looks over to him, curious. She gives him a shy wisp of a smile and that’s all the invitation he needs. He dips his hand into his jacket pocket and then holds out his fist. His fingers uncurl and he reveals a minute porcelain bird, one that is barely larger than his thumb nail. He winks at the girl—something more rare than a phoenix—and he takes a step towards the bed, slowly as any predator would upon approaching its prey. Her eyes widen at the sight of the small bird, eager, and he starts to whistle the song again, walking towards her. Sitting at her bedside, he allows her to pluck the small treasure out of his palm.

“Abigail, do you know that song?” he asks.

The little girl shakes her head and Hannibal smiles. Bedelia feels a tightening in her stomach, the primitive instinct that warns her of danger and she feels her brow furrow slightly. He begins to sing the words for the song, something that’s German, his voice oddly gentle and careful, a timbre she’s never heard from him before. The girl’s eyes meet his again; much like Bedelia herself, Hannibal stares for far too long to be considered appropriate, but the small child merely stares back, smiling. Bedelia watches this interaction raptly, wondering what they see looking at one another. Does the girl realise the company she keeps here in this hospital room? Does she understand she is face to face with someone who considers himself separate from the human race? Or does she stare and smile because she doesn’t realise that it’s not normal, because she’s like them, too?

His hand gently folds her fingers around the bird.

“Is it for me?” she chirps, keeping her hand closed obediently.

“Yes.”
“My parents are dead, aren’t they?” she asks calmly and even Bedelia has to mask her surprise that there are no tears.

Hannibal nods once. “Yes.”

“I’m all alone?” Her voice is small.

“No. You have me.”

He smiles at her and before she can protest, he begins to sing softly again, his hands clasped warmly over her fist. The child’s smile is hesitant at first, but then becomes fuller and eased. If Bedelia worried about the lives of others, she might step in and pull the little girl out of the jaws of this predator. But then, she’s always been curious of Hannibal’s potential—she knows her own limits, what she defines as ‘ethics’, but to see Hannibal’s full scope of promise is…well, it’s probably something that will make her legally culpable, too.

She imagines this will all end in body bags, though the surprise will be to see who’s inside.

Children are such selfish creatures, thinking only of themselves and their needs; perhaps it is the little girl’s natural instinct that causes her to latch onto this near stranger. Bedelia is willing to admit that she might have done the same, provided the stranger showed any sign of wealth and class, which Hannibal certainly did. She smiles slightly. Perhaps this child was better suited for Hannibal than expected. Now that would be an interesting arrangement to watch—Hannibal saddled with someone he actually had no intentions of throwing away at a later point? Oh yes, this is shaping up to be a wonderful game.

****

Alana throws her arms around Hannibal the moment she sees him, her heart pounding and her chest tight.

“Oh, thank god,” she murmurs. “I was so worried. I was so worried.”

They’re standing in the hallway of the clinic’s private room, six floors up. It’s been eight days since the attack that nearly killed the little girl and jeopardised his own safety and she’s been under strict orders from Bedelia not to visit him yet, that he needs his space to recover. But now she can see him and she’s so relieved to finally confirm he’s breathing.

He feels so solid and warm, *alive*. “You’ve nothing to worry about, Alana. I am fine and Abigail is as well.”

“It’s just…you aren’t someone who’d ever get involved in something like this.” She pulls back and her eyes are watering. “I heard you…are you all right?”

“I am fine.” He seems to sense that she’s not satisfied with that answer and he adds, “A little shaken, but I will survive.”

She folds her arms back around him, trying to hide the tears that fall regardless. How could anyone deserve what he’s gone through? Wonderful, considerate Hannibal. When would tragedy stay off his heels?

“Alana, you must not allow this to upset you. I am alive,” he tells her.

When she finally lets him go, she accepts the handkerchief he hands her with a slight laugh. She dabs at her eyes, wondering absently if her eyes are red. She must look terrible and he’s still maintained
his classic composure.

“I’m sorry. I’m acting like a complete wreck and you’re the one who…” she trails off.

“It is natural you would be worried.” He motions towards the door. “Would you like to meet her?”

Alana is caught off guard by the question. “Uh, sure. Yes. Is she up for it?”

“She is awake. I was showing her the book I was reading.”

Alana has no good reason to say no aside from her general discomfort at the thought of being in a hospital room, so she allows herself to be led into the private room where it appears Hannibal has been residing for the past week. Sitting upright in the bed is a young girl with long dark hair and the largest blue eyes. Alana’s eyes immediately stare at the large bandage around her neck.

“Abigail, I’ve brought someone who would like to meet you,” Hannibal says, walking them both over to the edge of the bed. “This is Alana Bloom, Bedelia’s assistant.”

Alana tears her eyes away from the bandage. “Hello, Abigail.”

“Hi.” The girl’s gaze is cool, sizing her up. “Are you friends?”

“Yes, we are,” Alana replies.

“Is that why you’re holding hands?”

Alana feels her cheeks heat as Hannibal explains. “Ms Bloom was worried about me. She’s finding comfort in holding my hand.”

“Oh. Like when we were holding hands.” Alana daren’t say it, but the little girl’s tone is almost competitive.

Hannibal’s voice is warm. “Yes.”

“How are you feeling?” Alana asks hesitantly.

“Okay.” She stares at Alana before her eyes flit over to Hannibal and she gets a large smile on her face. “He’s going to be my new dad!”

“Oh, is he?” she asks sweetly, feeling awkward and before she can question what gave the girl that idea, Abigail adds,

“Yes. He said he would be.”

Stunned, Alana turns to look at Hannibal, who says, “Bedelia didn’t mention it?”

“No. She didn’t.” She realises she needs to wipe the startled expression off her face. “That’s great.”

Hannibal isn’t fooled however and politely requests, “Would you excuse us for a moment, Abigail?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes linger on Alana.

The two adults leave the room and out into the hallway once more; there are nurses and patients around, but the two have adequate privacy to discuss the unexpected. “You’re…?”

“I am in the process of seeking legal guardianship over her.” He says it as though it’s a logical
“Hannibal. Are you sure you want to care for her? She…needs serious help.” She feels like a traitor for saying it.

“Are you concerned I will become overwhelmed by her needs?”

“She’s seen some really awful things. She’s experienced some truly horrific things.” Alana has been watching the news, after all; Mrs Hobbs still hasn’t been found.

“You are concerned I am purchasing faulty goods.”

She worries the inside of her cheek. “I want her to be okay, but I am worried. She’s not acting like a child who’s lost both of her parents.”

Hannibal gives her a sad smile. “I assure you, Alana, that Abigail is not acting strangely.”

She winces, realising how callous she must sound to him—Hannibal has actually lost parents, his family. No doubt he can relate to the child. “You know I’m more than happy to help you out, Hannibal. I can buy some clothes for her so she has something to wear when she…leaves the hospital.”

He nods, accepting this as an apology. “I shall repay you.”

“No, I have a ton of gift cards I never use. I wonder what that says about me.” She gives a slight laugh, wanting to take the awkward edge off the moment.

“Thank you, Alana.” He touches her arm and she immediately feels better.

If Hannibal is going to become a father practically overnight, he’s going to need lots of help and she’s certainly going to be there for him, no matter what.

*****

Alana isn’t sure how to feel about everything, but she loves Bedelia and Hannibal, so she tries to be supportive of this very strange arrangement. She’s arrived with Bedelia to the clinic and is now in the private room with Abigail and Hannibal; they’ve brought about a dozen shopping bags with clothes from Nordstrom’s, shoes from Macy’s, dolls from Target and board games from Kmart, and a nice new coat from Eddie Bauer. It’s all things for a child—a starter kit, she thinks with a hollow laugh—and stands quietly to the side as she watches the two cousins dote upon the little girl.

Abigail is…off. Alana feels dreadful for thinking that about a little girl, especially one who’s been through so much, but there is something about her eyes that just seem to have a certain vileness. Alana can’t shake the feeling and really doesn’t want to get to close to her. Perhaps the girl is suffering and Alana hopes that’s the case for the strange attitude—what could be worse than someone who shows no emotion, a sociopath? She’d spent a few hours on the internet researching PTSD and Alana doesn’t really think that the diagnose would fit Abigail (not that Alana is a psychiatrist), so she wonders if she’s just in shock still. Or maybe doesn’t quite understand what’s happened? What kind of child wouldn’t cry over the loss of her parents? What kind of child would be so quick to replace them?

But Bedelia and Hannibal don’t seem to see this side of Abigail at all and Alana doesn’t want to sound resistant to something good happening for the little girl or for Hannibal, who has simply come to life in the presence of the child he’s saved. She wants to say, ‘You’ve already done your job, Hannibal. You don’t need to make this personal,’ but then that would definitely make her a bad conclusion.
person and would undoubtedly insult him. So she keeps her mouth shut and as she watches everything unfold.

It’s formal now, a decision that Hannibal will in fact be her father. Bedelia has been pulling many strings within the state to get the papers rushed through all the proper channels. It will be finalised by the end of next week and Alana’s been fielding calls nonstop from very excited Kennedys who’ve learned that Hannibal of all people will be adopting a child. And Bedelia, normally as collected and stoic as Hannibal, seems unable to contain herself as she hands over a gift she’s bought as a welcoming present to their family.

“You may call me ‘Aunt Bee’,” she tells Abigail as she sits on the edge of the hospital bed. “When I was your age, I had an Aunt Jackie and I thought she was wonderful. I hope that I can be as wonderful to you.”

Bedelia opens a jewellery box to reveal a bracelet with a single charm on it, a 18k gold plated cutout of the state of Maryland. A garnet chip is embedded where Baltimore would be.

The little girl’s eyes open wide as she studies the bracelet. “This is for me?”

“Yes. Do you like it?” Bedelia asks, her head tilting to look closer at the child’s reaction.

“Can I wear it now?” Abigail asks.

“May you wear it now,” Hannibal corrects. “Not now. You may when you get home.”

“At your home?” she asks cautiously; perhaps she’s afraid she’ll be going back to the house she used to live in with her biological parents.

“At our home, Abigail.”

And even with all her doubt, Alana’s heart can’t help but melt with the two embrace.

*****

It’s the afternoon Abigail is to be discharged from the hospital and Hannibal has picked out clothing for her to wear from the assortment that Alana had brought over. As he ties a small silk scarf careful around her neck, explaining it will cover her bandage, he feels very possessive of her; he’d purchased the scarf during an impromptu weekend holiday in Rome and had stored it away in his wardrobe, unsure what he’d do with it, but still appreciative of its potential for his enjoyment. The silk has marble statues woven onto it, the cool clean white of bone against the blood red background.

He’s already had her belongings sent ahead with Bedelia’s housekeeper, who has watched over the house in his absence. Rarely does he trust others in his home, let alone without supervision, but his cousin has assured him that all her employees understand discretion and so he concedes to the service for now. Returning to his own home will be a relief in many ways—while he has unlimited patience to live in the clinic and endure the patronising of his cousin coming to visit unannounced, he misses his own bed and his kitchen. Not to mention Nurse Tony’s advances were becoming a tad desperate at this point and Hannibal didn’t need to risk a jilted member of his staff.

As Abigail puts on her shoes (that have velcro straps and light up at the heels, painfully tacky), he removes something from his jacket pocket.

“Abigail, I have something for you.”
He holds out a leather fob on which is a single house key. She’s too young to really be allowed to own a key to his house, but he knows that the symbolism and responsibility of having it will be important to her and as she plucks it out of his palm, her voice shakes.

“This is for your house?”

“Our house,” he emphasises.

“It’s for me?”

“Yes.”

“I promise I won’t lose it,” she says, closing her fist around it. She looks very determined to keep him happy.

“I trust you,” he says as his eyes bore into hers.

When they leave the room she’s lived in for the past two weeks, she protests the use of the wheelchair. He admires her desire for independence and her drive to fight for her own dignity, but these are rules he has to enforce as the head of the clinic.

“You must sit in the wheelchair, Abigail. The clinic rules say you must ride in it until you’re out of the building.”

“I want to walk.” Her voice has a pleading edge to it and he tries to placate her.

“Isn’t it more fun than walking through the hospital, though? Having your own chauffeur?”

“I haven’t been able to walk around very much, though.”

He nods knowingly. “When we get to our house, you will be allowed to walk around as much as you like.”

“Is it a big house?” she asks, trying to look back at him, but he can tell she’s frightened to move her neck too much.

“Not any longer with you in it,” he admits.

She swings her legs as he pushes her over to the elevator. “Do you have a yard?”

“Yes, I do. It is small, though.” He’s seen the photos of the Hobbs house with its large forest acreage.

“Can I play in it?”

“You may.”

The exit the elevator on the ground floor and she smiles at him in the reflection of the clean glass on the walls. “I can sing This Little Light of Mine—want to hear?”

He’s never liked the song. “I would love that, Abigail.”

While he enjoys the discomfort of others, it would be unnecessary suffering to make her go through the area where Hobbs tried to kill her and they head towards the lobby on the north end of the building. He feels exceptionally smug as he passes by approving faces of colleagues and subordinates, all in awe that he not only saved this girl’s life, but that he’s taking her in as his own.
When they reach the front door and she can finally clamber out of the wheelchair, he takes her by the hand. “We are taking a taxi home, Abigail. Have you ever been in a taxi?”

“No!” She looks excited but when she realise the white Crown Victoria parked at the curb is what they’ll be traveling in, her enthusiasm falters. “Why isn’t it yellow?”

“Because this taxi company thought that white would be nicer.”

Hannibal wonders if she’d ever been to Baltimore prior the night she was brought to the hospital, watching her stare out the window for the entire trip, her eyes wide in awe. He feels a certain level of pride that this is his city—where he lives, where he went to school, where he works, where he eats—and he wants to share all of it with her. He’ll have to wait to give her the whole metropolis, but for now, she can have this taste. When they pull up in front of his house, he removes the money from his wallet and pauses. As her father, it’s his responsibility to teach her things, to rewrite her small town upbringing.

“Would you like to hand the driver the money, Abigail?” he asks, holding out the crisp bills.

She looks at him, an enthusiastic smile on her small mouth. “Can I?”

“May you. Yes, you may.”

The divider between the driver and them opens and Abigail holds out the money to the smiling man.

“Here!” she chirps, placing the two bills into his hand.

“Thank you, young lady. Now let me give you the change.” Abigail is excited and eagerly snatches up the money when it’s handed to her. “Here.”

She offers it out to Hannibal and he divides up the bills from the change, giving her the coins first. “You may keep these for your piggy bank.” He places the quarters and pennies in her left hand then places a five dollar bill and four ones in her right. “Now, this is for his tip. Hand it to him and tell him that he did an excellent job.”

“You did an eggslent job,” Abigail tells him in a very serious tone.

“Thank you,” the driver says.

“He gets to keep that money for himself. Put yours in your pocket and unbuckle your seatbelt.”

As he helps the girl out of the vehicle, the passenger side window rolls down. “Uh, Dr Lecter?”

Hannibal snaps around to look at the man. “Yes?”

The man gives a lopsided smile. “You—you probably don’t remember me, but you treated me last year for pneumonia. You said you caught it just in time.”

Hannibal had recognised the man, though he hadn’t been able to place where until now. “Mr Cryer. I do remember you.”

“You and your daughter have a good day,” the cab driver tells him.

Hannibal nods graciously. “Thank you. Yourself as well.”
“Bye!” Abigail waves then grins up at him driving off. “He thought you were my dad.” Her face instantly sober and Hannibal smiles. Good, he doesn’t want her to have happy memories of her former life, otherwise his plan will take that much longer to complete.

“Why don’t we go inside? Would you like to unlock the front door with your house key?”

She hurries to grab the key out of her coat pocket and relies on him for support as they climb up the front steps; she’s still weak and fumbles with the key, unsure which way to twist it, so he shows her and they’re greeted with the familiarity of home. Abigail seems stunned by the carefully selected pieces he’s purchased to furnish his home, asking him dozens of questions about the art he has on the walls ("Did you paint these?") to the fresh flowers in the vases ("Are these from your garden?") to the tasteful furniture ("Why do you have so many chairs?"). They explore the house together hand in hand, allowing her to get adjusted to her new surroundings before he leads her to the former guest room adjacent to his.

“Abigail, this is your room. I was not sure what your favourite colour was, so if you tell me—“

“I can pick the colour of my room?” she interrupts, looking up at him in surprise.

He is excited to have her now, so his patience towards her lack of manners is bountiful. “You may.”

“I want teal!” she requests.

“What a nice choice. I’ll have paint samples brought over for you to choose from. Then perhaps this weekend we shall have painters paint the walls.” As she goes over to touch the down comforter on the bed, he opens the door to her closet, gesturing to the clothing hanging inside. “This is your closet and all of your clothes are in here.” He moves to the left and touches the knob to a second door. “In here is your bathroom.”

She still seems hesitant. “This is all for me?”

“Yes, Abigail.” He takes a step towards the door leading to the hall. “Why don’t I allow you to get familiar with your room? I will be right across the hall in my own room.”

“Okay.” She glances to the gift bags left at the foot of her bed, colourful packages peeking out between the tufts of tissue paper. “Can I play with the toys Mrs Lanny brought me?”

“Alana?” She nods. “Yes, you may. They belong to you now.” As she pulls out a set of boardgames that bring back nostalgia of being bored while Bedelia forced him to Snakes and Ladders, he tells her, “Anything you don’t like, we can donate to the hospital and I will buy you something else.

She holds up a Monopoly box. “Will you play this with me later?”

“Tonight before you go to bed,” he promises.

She carries it over proudly to the chair beside the door. “I’m going to set it right here.”

He sees her lean towards him, an unconscious need to be physically reassured that she isn’t alone and he reaches out to touch her shoulder; she smiles up at him, not twisting or stretching her neck too much because of the bandage still across her throat.

In his own bedroom, he sits out of sight and listens. She’s opening packages, the loud crinkle of plastic and cardboard carrying clearly, and she’s talking to herself; he wonders if her time as an only child has left her with the habit of talking aloud when alone. He writes down in his notebook that he will have to train her not to talk needlessly anymore, then makes the note to help her build her own
memory palace. She can play and talk in there as loudly as she wants and it will all be safely contained. Her footsteps move around the room, further investigating her new surroundings. Mentally he maps her path, saving it in marble footprints within the layout of his mind; they look like a slow and curious dance, whisking her from one end of the room to the next and then back. The distant sound of the faucet in her bathroom running and then being shut off and cabinet doors being open and shut. He smiles as he imagines her expression while she explores. Certainly she’d be impressed by the grandeur of her new living quarters, definitely better than anything a welder could have offered her in Keedysville. He listens as toys are moved about the room, books taken off the small bookshelf, the curtains are explored; he’d not had much time to prepare the room for her, only a few hours while she’d slept three nights ago. Despite what Bedelia thinks, there is room in his heart for her and by proxy, his house.

He knocks on the door, watching her turn swiftly to his direction. “I’m going to start dinner now.”

She jumps up from the floor and trots after him, ever a curious child. “What are we eating?”

“What would you like?” he asks as he leads her to the kitchen.

“Macaroni and cheese.”

An acceptable food, he thinks to himself. “I believe I have a recipe for that somewhere.”

She stands beside him at the kitchen counter, her face twisted in confusion. “You don’t make it from a box?”

Hannibal has rarely found himself at a loss for words and he blinks. “I—I’m afraid I don’t have any macaroni and cheese in a box.”

“Oh.” Her face goes blank and the disappointment is palpable.

A concession is needed, something that will start their life together without any bad feelings on her part. “I…shall call someone and have them bring a box over to cook. What kind of vegetable would you like with you macaroni and cheese?”

“Strawberries.”

“Strawberries are a fruit.” He quickly adds, “But if that is what you want, then I shall get them for you.”

She is shy, but her gratitude is real. “Thank you.”

Hannibal makes a quick phone call to the shopping service that Bedelia keeps insisting he use and requests the needed ingredients for Abigail’s dinner, actually embarrassed to be making such an order. Nearly an hour later the food—he uses the term loosely—has finished cooking and he fights down his disgust as he plates the messy Kraft meal as neatly as he can. Abigail has offered to set the table and asks him if he’d like a fork or a spoon, which causes him to chuckle. As if he’d have place settings without both. Hannibal has decided to finish off leftovers in the refrigerator (a week old container of college student kugel) and realises he’s going to need a fragrant wine to get him through a meal of smelling the chemicals she’s eating.

As she eats, talking to him about the flowers on the table and ‘why do you talk like that?’, he learns enough about her to start formulating how to approach her upbringing.

“Are you my dad now?” she asks as she picks up a strawberry slice with her fingers; he restrains himself from correcting that behaviour.
“If you would like me to be. I would very much like to be your father, Abigail,” he tells her in earnest.

“Do I have to call you ‘sir’?”

While Hannibal enjoys formalities, there is no need for such a wedge between the two of them.

“Never.”

“Can I call you ‘daddy’?” Her fingers are sticky from the strawberry juice and he is grateful that he has no table cloth for her to stain.

“If you would like.”

She smiles and he can feel her legs swinging by his. “I wasn’t allowed to call my dad ‘daddy’.” Her lips twist into a frown. “Do I have to go back to school?”

“Not yet. You and I will be spending time together.” He’s still under official paid leave while the Clinic board concludes its investigation on Hobb’s death. It’s frustrating, but it serves his agenda better than if he’d been allowed to return back to work.

“Why?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Don’t you think it’s important to know each other if we are going to be family?”

“Yes.” She looks at the small elbow noodles on her plate. “Do we have secrets from one another?”

“For now. We can tell each other our secrets when we feel comfortable.”

The look of relief on her face tells him more than words ever could. She’ll want to talk about her biological parents to someone at some point and now he’s made himself the most likely to get to hear what she has to say. He smiles at her, taking a bite of meat. No, there shall be no secrets between them.

*****

“I had a bad dream,” Abigail says a few weeks later, standing in the doorway of his bedroom.

The words wait on the tip of his tongue, words a father would say. ‘You have to sleep in your own bed.’ But the soft compassion of being a brother comes first and against his will he pulls the blankets of his bed aside; accepting the invitation, she runs over to the bed and crawls in, pulling the blankets up around her. He tucks her in beside him, curious at his own actions because he doesn’t like sharing a bed. Her nightgown still smells like the lavender sachet he keeps with it under her pillow.

“What was your bad dream about?” he asks though he is certain he already knows.

“Them.” She squeezes her eyes shut, her hand finding his. “They wanted me to come back home.”

“I see.”

“My mom told me I had to or…he’d get very mad. I told her that I couldn’t because I had a new daddy now and a new family.” The next thing she says is a breathy whisper. “He got really mad. He didn’t like that you buy me so many things.”

“There is nothing wrong with wanting things, Abigail.”

There is quiet between the two of them and he waits patiently—
“My dad killed my mom,” she whispers, her voice small and filled with burden.

There. The words he’s been waiting for. “I know.”

“How did you know?”

He reaches her free hand out to touch her soft cheek, noting the smallest flinch beneath his fingertips. “I could tell.”

“Like the police?” she asks.

“Your mother is missing. That’s why they know.”

In the dark, he can see the shine of her eyes, but nothing else. The fear however, is felt. “How do you know?”

He takes her hands between his, breathing in the shadows in the room. “Because you and I are alike.”

*****

In the dining room of the Lecter household is a painting of Leda and the Swan by François Boucher; he’d obtained it not long after his twentieth birthday and since then had remained his only constant companion through his dining.

Alana does not seem to think of it as highly as he does, however. “Hannibal, do you think that's appropriate for your dining room with a five year old?”

Hannibal seethes momentarily because he doubts that Abigail is becoming corrupted by a painting, of all things—the household ban on animated children’s shows still stands for a very good reason. But he had no patience for someone questioning him and so he says, “I shall move it, then.”

He removes the painting as Alana promises to mind the caramelising onions and sets it on his bed, smirking at it slightly as he looks it over. It is a favourite for a reason, after all. Today he’s cooking liver and onions, a favorite and quick recipe that he’s relieved Abigail is familiar with, and when the little girl enters the kitchen to inquire how much longer it will be before they can eat, she greets Alana hesitantly.

“Alana has joined us for lunch, Abigail,” he explains.

Abigail looks her over. “Okay.”

Not wanting to allow more tension between them, Hannibal decides to split them up by giving the child a task. “Why don’t you set the napkins and flatware out for three settings as I have shown you?”

“Okay!”

When Abigail returns, she stands at his side and tugs on his belt loop. “Where’s the picture of the lady and the goose?”

Hannibal suppresses a smug smile in Alana’s direction. “I thought perhaps you and I could pick a new painting out together.”
“Today?”

No, he’d not intended that at all, but perhaps it would be best to get it out of the way. He hates bare spots on the walls in his house.

“After lunch.” Glancing to Bedelia’s assistant, he decides it might also be interesting to study her interactions with Abigail further, so he extends an invitation to her. “You are welcome to join us if you wish to, Alana.”

An hour and a half later, once the banker’s liver and onions are eaten entirely and all the dishes washed, the three make the trek in the Bentley across town to acquire the new art for the dining room. There’s been heavy rain the entire week and large, dirty puddles span the entirety of the city. He carries Abigail from the car to the shop in fear she’ll get soaked and dirty as they walk through a side parking lot to the upscale home furnishing store he knows has acceptable paintings and prints for sale. The floor manager of the shop recognises Hannibal and quickly comes over to greet him; in turn he introduces Abigail, who promptly says,

“We had to replace the painting of the lady and the goose at home. I get to help pick out a new one out.”

“That’s nice,” the woman says in a patronising tone.

“Abigail, that’s a nice painting of a cat, isn’t it?” Alana asks, pointing to a contemporary painting on the wall.

Hannibal momentarily frowns; as much as he likes Alana, their taste is extraordinarily different when it comes to art and he has no intention in allowing her to influence his daughter.

“Let’s start at the front of the store,” he suggests.

“This is ugly,” Abigail asserts as she looks at a dramatic oil painting of Jonas being swallowed alive by a whale.

He agrees completely. “All right, let’s look at the next one.”

“I like this one.” It’s garishly bright, tropical fish in a mélange.

“It is very nice. But I don't know if fish belong in a dining room.”

“They would belong in a bathroom,” Abigail informs him as though she is actually an art critic.

“Perhaps.” He looks to the next one. “What do you think of this one?”

Alana grimaces at the sight of Saint Ines being stabbed through the throat. “Maybe we should look at ones that are a bit more appropriate for a six year old.”

They walk past rather pedestrian still-life and dry landscapes, all of which he shoots down. Alana attempts to rush them past a massive print of La Grande Odalisque, but Abigail plants her feet firmly and looks at the image in fascination.

“What about this one?”

“Why this one?” he asks curiously

“She’s pretty and I like her crown.”
Alana looks flustered. “Abigail, she’s naked.”

Abigail gives Alana a look he would consider rude. “So was the lady with the goose.”

Hannibal fights to keep his smile from looking too triumphant. “Let’s see what else there is first.”

Hannibal finally influences her into agreeing that an etching of a terra-cotta war horse that would look nice in their dining room. It’s a pale comparison to Leda and the Swan, but if it will prevent others from questioning his judgement and parenting skills, then he will accept it for now. Perhaps when they have their holiday overseas he’ll be able to locate something more stimulating to look at while he eats.

“I like ponies,” Abigail offers as the large painting is paid for.

“Would you like art for your room?” he asks as the floor associate runs his credit card.

Abigail looks over her shoulder at the large print of La Grande Odalisque. “Can I have the princess?”

Hannibal smiles and leans in close so that Alana, who is browsing a collection of tabletop ornaments, won’t hear him. “Not today. Next week, perhaps. After the painters have painted your bedroom walls. We need to make sure that it will match the colour scheme of the room.”

True to his word, the large print is purchased with an appropriate frame the following week and delivered, hung on the wall across from Abigail’s bed. She’s delighted to have it and he has to give her a firm, but informative lecture on why she can’t put her fingers on it or the frame and because she is so eager to impress him, she promises him she understands. Children have to learn how to respect their belongings and while he would give her the moon and the stars, she is no different.

Her fascination with the painting borders on unhealthy, which in turn fascinates him. The Odalisque is almost her imaginary friend and he often overhears her in her bedroom talking with the woman, but he knows it’s simply because she has no one else to speak to in their house aside from him. He decides he’s not jealous of the attention she gives to the Odalisque, though as he starts his campaign for governorship, he notices how much she misses spending time with it. Alana has purchased an assortment of Barbie dolls for her and while he loathes the cheapness of the toys, he can’t help but find it amusing when she asks him if he’ll make a ‘crown’ for her dark haired Barbie like the ‘princess’ in the painting. Using a hideous tie that he’d acquired as a gift from one of his many cousins, he ties the makeshift turban around the doll’s synthetic hair and watches his daughter skip away with her Odalisque, now her closest companion.

While he has no problem with her toting her doll with her to various locations, as she often regales amusing stories of the court her doll holds, he does become rather insistent that she be dressed when they leave the house.

“Your odalisque needs to wear clothes when she leaves the house,” he tells her one Sunday morning as he pins a small songbird broach to the front of her dress.

Abigail is quick to correct. “Princess, Daddy.”

“No, you are a princess—she is an odalisque.”

“She has a crown.”

“She needs to wear clothes,” he counters.
“I don’t want to go to Mass. Why can’t you have a speech instead?” She likes traveling to the different locations he visits to talk to Maryland’s citizens.

He brushes a loose thread off of her dress and drops it in the wastebasket beside her desk. “We are Catholic and that means we can’t have speeches on Sunday.”

“Then can we just stay home and dance together?” she begs.

Hannibal’s feet feel rooted to the spot and in spite of himself, he finds himself wanting to make the excuse as well. Mass is so dry and while he thinks that the stories of God smiting people are very entertaining, he does acknowledge it’s a waste of two perfectly good hours. He is hesitant to give into her whims though. She can’t learn that it’s acceptable to abandon what’s expected of them.

“Just this once, Abigail.”

She smiles broadly and drops her doll as she sprints to the living room to put on the cd player to her favourite dancing music. He’s been teaching her how to waltz and she’s quick to learn the steps. He stoops to pick up the doll and nearly calls her back to have her put it away, but he can hear Mischa’s voice echoing in the back of his mind palace, laughing as he dances with her. Chores could wait, he supposes, and gently lays the odalisque onto Abigail’s bed.

******

Like many summers before, Hannibal makes the annual pilgrimage to the Kennedy Compound for holiday, though this time he has an additional passenger. Abigail, whose adoption papers are being processed this very week, sits in the backseat of the Bentley, trying to sing along to the Flower Duet in English as she draws in a colouring book Alana has bought for her. He is eager to show off his new daughter to Lady Murasaki, wanting her to know that he is not just a revenge hungry boy, but a man with discipline.

Bedelia travels up to Hyannis Port by plane and meets them at Lady Murasaki’s house, escorting his daughter to the backyard while he carries their bags up to his old bedroom. When he returns downstairs he finds the three women on the back porch, Abigail the centre of attention.

“Why don’t you wander amongst the flowers, Abigail?” he suggests, wanting to talk to his aunt alone.

“May I pick one?” she says, looking to him hopefully.

“You may pick a violet or pansy. Do you remember how I showed you to pick a delicate flower so you do not damage the plant?” he inquires.

“Yes,” she promises.

“Only one, remember.”

“Thank you.” She darts off the back porch into the garden, exploring under his watchful gaze.

“She’s very polite,” Lady Murasaki observes.

“Yes. She has been quick to learn manners,” he says proudly as he watches her studying a chrysanthemum.

“She calls me ‘Aunt Bee’,” Bedelia states serenely, making her own claim of ownership over Abigail. “I hope to teach her about English dressage as you taught me, Aunt Missy.”
Lady Murasaki is quiet and he and Bedelia exchange looks. When she finally decides to speak, the words make Hannibal uneasy.

“She’s the daughter of a killer. Why do you want her, Hannibal?”

“To have a child. To explore the opportunity of fatherhood.” He means it.

“You have no love to give a child. You have no patience or consideration to another’s life.”

Hannibal’s brow furrows at his aunt’s words, hurt and betrayed by her not sharing in his joy. As the years have passed, Lady Murasaki has become increasingly harsh in her words to him and he can’t understand why. She has no idea of his private life, but perhaps she doesn’t need to happen across him to know he’s the Chesapeake Ripper, which is an unfair prejudice to hold against him.

“I will care for her.”

She lifts her brows, challenging him. “How? You care only for yourself.”

Hannibal hates being defensive. “I cared for Mischa.”

“She’s not Mischa, Hannibal.” The words are cold and stark, worse than if she’d struck him.

‘Not yet.’

“I can give her a life that others would not,” he insists.

“It’s for Aunt Bee!” Abigail says happily as she returns, handing the flower over to his cousin.

“Thank you. It matches my blouse.” Bedelia smiles in approval.

“Will you take me to the water, please?” Abigail asks.

He nods his head, happy for an excuse to leave the uncomfortable discussion. “Of course.”

He refuses to look back to his cousin and aunt, anger stirring under the surface as he feigns interest in Abigail’s talk of flowers.

Lady Murasaki passed away the following year. Hannibal had been sad and tolerated Bedelia’s condolences over the phone, hollow and impersonal words that she said to anyone who’d lost a family member. As expected, he is named her main heir, inheriting the house on the Compound and many of her personal belongings, though much of her wealth was distributed among her favourite charities. A small trust is left to Abigail upon her twenty-fifth birthday. It takes only days to have the Murasaki clan swords returned to his ownership from the University of Atlanta and they regain their rightful place at the head of the family altar. He smells the faint clove oil on the blades and informs Abigail that one day she’d be old enough to help him with the cleaning ritual, which she seems very pleased to hear.

Many of the antiques are auctioned off and a few are given to various Kennedy family members who have a certain level of emotional attachment to them, and the rest are donated to the Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles to be exhibited in the Takako Kennedy wing on the second floor. Neither he nor Abigail cry.

*****

Hannibal and Abigail only stay three days with Lady Murasaki before the chill in the house forces him to take an early leave. Before he leaves, he corners his cousin to request a favour.
“Bedelia, I would like to use the hunting cabin next week. Can you assure me that I won’t be interrupted?”

She plucks his watch from his wrist, a gift from her late father, and tucks it into her pocket. “Of course, Hannibal. Please enjoy your vacation.”

“Thank you.”

Hannibal has invested in various medications from the clinic for years, spirited away before anyone realised they were gone in the first place. When he tells Abigail that they’ll be going on holiday a second time, she’s overjoyed. They pack their luggage into the car (the trunk is currently busy) and they drive up to an isolated preserve in New York. The cabin is not much of a cabin as it is a lodge, but Hannibal needs as much space as he can get; sending Abigail out to play in the field of summer flowers behind the lodge, he hauls their companion into the basement and unpacks their suitcases.

When he’s satisfied that everything is where it needs to be, he finds her sitting amongst wild daisies and she’s plucked an armful of them. Sitting down beside her, he asks,

“Abigail, would you like me to remove your loneliness?”

“Can doctors do that?” she questions.

“Oh, yes. I’m particularly good at it. It’s going to take a little medicine, you understand.”

“Okay.”

He pulls a syringe out of his pocket and while she looks upset to see it, she doesn’t protest. He finds it remarkably brave. Wiping the inside of her arm clean with an alcohol wipe, he taps any air bubbles in the syringe loose.

“You should look at it. Face your fears,” he instructs her.

“Okay.”

She winces as the fine needle slips into her skin and he injects the carefully mixed solution into her. Within seconds, her eyelids become heavy and she falls back into the flowers, the daisies scattering from her arms. She’s not asleep but in a highly susceptible state, so he speaks to her of his sister, his tone loving and reverent of the child long since gone. Carefully, oh so carefully, he intertwines their conversation to make Mischa’s history sound as if it’s her own. Slowly she starts to focusing all her attention to him when he says, ‘Mischa’, her eyes becoming momentarily clearer.

After a few hours when her eyes can no longer stay open, he gathers the daisies and collects her into his arms, carrying her off to the bedroom. She falls asleep almost immediately and he injects her with something new as the room’s record player plays Goldberg’s variations quietly and continuously. The daisies leave with him.

After he’s eaten a light dinner, she finds him in a room that is heavy in the smoke of incense and almost dark from the edge of dusk that breaks through the trees. His sister’s photo is set amongst the daisies she picked and candles and he’s knelt before it, a makeshift altar.

She falls heavily to her knees, sitting down beside him.

“What are you doing?” she asks a bit loudly.

“Honouring my sister.” He points to the photograph.
“Where is she?”

“She was killed.”

Abigail is quiet momentarily, swaying to the music that plays softly in the background, before asking, “What happened?”

“Some very bad people came into the home where I lived when I was eight and took my family hostage. When the government failed to meet their demands, they killed my parents.” Hannibal’s skin feels a chill, though he knows there is no draft in the room. “It was a cold winter and there wasn’t any food for our captors. They had kept my sister and I alive to use as final trade for their safety, but they became too hungry to function…” He is hesitant to say the next part because he’s never said it aloud, but she has consumed her own mother—she can see him. “They killed her and ate her.”

Abigail sits quietly and reaches her hand out to rest on his. “Did you eat her, too?”

A cold relief fills him. He is seen. “Yes.”

“What did she taste like?” she asks after some time, her eyes pulling away from the photo of the child before them.

“Life.”

“Is she an angel now?” she asks curiously.

“There is no such thing as angels, I’m afraid. No heaven, no afterlife. She’s simply gone forever.” It’s disappointing, but he accepts it as the only reality there is. “But this keeps her memory alive.”

“Can I help?”

“I would appreciate that.”

“I love you, too, Mischa,” she declares, bowing her head as he had.

“Perhaps there is room for Mischa here.” He touches the spot above her heart.

Her smile is large from her drugged state. “She could be like my sister. I’d never be alone.”

“Yes.”

She stares at the picture again and Hannibal wishes to know what’s inside her mind. But finally she speaks, balling her hand into a fist and brings it to rest below her ribcage. “There’s room for Mischa here.”

*****

After two days Abigail no longer fears the needle and offers out her arm. Of course she isn't aware that large tracts of time are passing her by, her mind clouded with the haze of new memories and medications. She hums and he along with her, wanting her to be comforted. In one of the guest rooms he plays a continuous loop of Goldberg’s Variations on the record player, sitting with her on the floor as he shows her pictures and drawings of the past he shared with his sister. After some time he shuts the curtains to the room, plunging them into darkness save for a single candle between them, which is held so that the burning wick at her eye level.

“Tell me about your mother, Abigail.”
“She dyes her hair blonde because it makes her feel pretty.” She blinks. “Sometimes she lets me have an ice cream cone at McDonalds.”

She’s quiet, lost in thought and eventually he has to ask, “What else?”

Her gaze drifts up to his face. “You look like a skeleton.”

“Tell me about your mother,” he prompts again and her eyes focus on the flame between them.

“Sometimes she lets me have an ice cream cone at McDonalds.”

“Tell me about your mother,” he prompts again and her eyes focus on the flame between them.

“She’s quiet. She doesn’t like to talk much because…we have so many secrets. Families are supposed to have secrets.”

He blows out the candle and lights a new one.

“Tell me your family’s secret, Abigail.”

“Dad takes us to the cabin to help with the meat. It’s men he finds in the forest. I saw. Mom is scared of it.”

“Does she eat the meat?”

“Yes. She says we have to because if we don’t, it will make Dad mad and we’ll be next.”

Hannibal blows out the candle quickly, causing her to flinch. He lights the third candle.

“Tell me about your father, Abigail.”

“I helped him butcher her.”

Her little voice sounds so beautiful saying that word, ‘butcher’. As though she understands completely what the word means and that she’ll know how to use it in his work.

“I know, Abigail. You mustn’t feel ashamed.”

“He told me that we had to honour her. And we cut her up and put her in the refrigerator. And stuffed a pillow with her hair. And planted her bones under her roses so that she could always be with them and they’d grow heathy and strong.” Her brow wrinkles and she refocuses her eyes on the flame. “He made me breakfast with her meat.”

Again, she says it so sadly and so clearly. Meat. Yes, this is his daughter and they are meant to be. His heart, ever broken, is screaming for her.

“You did what you had to in order to survive,” he comforts.

“What if she doesn’t love me because I ate her?”

“Abigail, she loved you very much, but she is dead now. And I am certain that if she knew you lived because of her sacrifice, she would be very happy. You were already made from her.” He stares into her eyes. “Did she not taste good?”

Abigail’s lips curl in the light of the flame. “She was the best meat I ever had.”

Hannibal blows out the candle.

*****
She’s lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling of a dark room, one of her hands running back and forth over a velvet pillow cover. It feels purple.

He speaks to her with beautiful words and she knows that she should know what’s being said, but she has to whisper, “I don’t remember what that means.”

Had she always had a brother? But she always thought...what room had he slept in at home? ‘My room was across from yours. Do you remember? You would come into my room and I would read to you. Do you remember? My room had been painted blue and green and overlooked the ducklings in the garden. Do you remember?’

Memories she’d never had before come rushing back to her, woven as she looks at black and white photographs and delicate watercolour paintings. Music fills her ears and laughter and singing and her mother's voice and her father's voice, neither of which she's ever heard before. Home was in a large house that looks like a castle and her older brother missed reading to her and they used to count the ducklings in the pond behind the castle. But now home was in Baltimore and her brother was older and she has different coloured hair than the photo and that man had tried to kill her, but her brother had placed his hands on her and said she could live...

She stares into his red eyes and wonders if he’s real, so she smiles and reaches up to touch his face. He smiles back and her fingers trace over his lips, along his nose, and over the strong ridge of his brow.

“Hannibal?” she asks.

He speaks again in their language and she begins to laugh, because she doesn’t remember or understand any of the beautiful things he tells her. But he’ll help her...

*****

When his mother finished bathing Mischa, she’d always allow the fresh smelling child to put on her nightgown and adorn herself with her jewellery—all of it. Mischa would giggle and babble in her toddler-speak as she allowed herself to be ornamented with precious stones and gems, a heavy burden to carry, but always smiling as she knew she looked beautiful. Then she would walk to his room with their mother following close behind, smiling mischievously at Hannibal. He’d always call her Princess and Mischa would giggle, crawling into bed beside him so that he could read fairytales to her, his radiant little beauty. Long after she’d fall asleep and as his own eyes grew heavy, his mother would return and collect her jewellery, singing Italian lullabies to him so that he’d drift off as well. He’d feel content as she tucked him in, kissing him gently before she backed out of the bedroom, still singing.

Abigail stands in the middle of the room—they’ve finished their dinner and she stares in the direction of the bathroom, swaying as she narrows her eyes at the door and light beyond it.

“May I have a bubble bath?” she finally asks, the sound of the bathwater already running triggering the request.

He smiles. “Yes, you may.”

As she allows herself to be scrubbed clean, he hums along to the music and she follows suit. Afterwards, he has her dress into her nightgown as he brings out a traveling jewellery case and opens it on the bed. Abigail sits in the centre of the bed, her stare focused on his neck as he carefully brings out Mother’s topaz necklace.
“Mother received this from Father on their first trip to Venice. She always said it brought out the colour of your eyes.” The golden brown of the stones once matched Mischa’s irises and now they bring out the bright blue of Abigail’s. “And she is right.”

Next he removes a small gold ring with a floral design etched across the band. “And Mother bought this when she was on a trip to Austria. It was before you or I were born.” He threads one of her small fingers through it. “You’ll have to grow a bit before it will fit properly.”

He wraps strands of pearls around her neck, adorns her head with the small diamond cornet Mother wore to the International Debutant Ball, slips rings onto her tiny fingers. There are rubies, emeralds, sapphires every colour of the rainbow, diamonds of various carats, gold and newly polished silver. He holds a mirror for her to look at and she spends long minutes staring deeply into her own eyes, occasionally tilting and turning her head as though she can’t quite name who she sees. When she finally seems satisfied by what she sees, he sets the mirror aside and asks,

“Shall I read you a bedtime story, little sister?”

“Yes, please…”

He holds open a family photo album and begins to recite the story of Mischa and Hannibal. She falls asleep beside him and he lies beside her, touching damp locks of her hair as he softly sings to her in Italian.

*****

The blade of the hunting knife has been sharpened so finely that Hannibal knows it will take the slightest amount of pressure for it to cut through skin and cartilage and muscle like butter. So easy a child could use it and it would kill.

*****

Hannibal awakes on the eighth morning and sees that she is Mischa. He runs his fingertips along the side of her face.

“I’m here, Mischa,” he murmurs as she looks into his eyes.

“Will we be together forever?” she asks as he reaches under his pillow for a syringe.

“Forever.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” A pinch of a needle in her arm. “Why don’t you get dressed? Your clothes are in the closet.”

She stumbles out of the bed, still half asleep and now fully drugged, walking over to the closet.

“These are my clothes?” she asks, staring at the expensive attire he’s purchased for her to replace the things Alana originally brought to start Abigail off with a new life.

“Yes.” He stands from the bed and coaxes her to investigate what he’s purchased worthy of a Lecter. “Dress and I shall return for you.

Once the door is shut, he hurries through the house to the basement where he has stashed the final piece of her reconditioning. It takes five minutes to properly prepare, but he returns to her and finds
her fully dressed. Taking her hand, he leads her through the lodge to the kitchen where she freezes in her tracks. Her pupils are dilated and she sways slight in time with Goldberg’s variations, staring at the man propped up in the chair at the kitchen table, wearing clothes she would certainly find familiar.

“That’s my dad,” she whispers, holding Hannibal’s hand tight.

“Yes,” he agrees. “You need to decide if you want to be his daughter any longer.”

She breaks her gaze from the man at the table to look up at him. “I don’t have to be?”

“No. You are in control,” Hannibal tells her firmly. “He tried to kill you and he failed. Fathers shouldn’t be failures when it comes to their children. Would you want to accept a father who is a failure?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“If you let him live, you’ll go back to being Abigail Hobbs, who was weak and vulnerable. She was the one he left to bleed out on the hospital floor.” He breaks a capsule of blood against her throat and pulls back his sticky, wet fingers. “Is that what you want? Do you want to bleed out from where he cut you? You’ll die for sure.”

She looks horrified at the blood and holds his hand tighter. “Can’t I stay with you?”

“Yes. I want that more than anything.” He slips the sharp knife into her hand and she doesn’t notice. “But you’re the one holding the knife. Only you can decide to stay. To let me be your family. To let me be the one who loves you.”

She looks down at the blade in her hand, curiously. “I’ll do anything to stay.”

“You know what to do,” Hannibal whispers into her ear.

The man is paralysed from the morning’s injection, though his eyes dart furiously between the two of them and the knife. Abigail comes to stand beside the man and holds up in her fist, blade pointed down. She glances over at him and he nods minutely, encouraging her without her realising it. She stabs the knife into the side of the man’s throat and the flesh opens beautifully; she looks startled, possibly remembering what her mother had looked like with a slit throat and Hannibal is quick to redirect her thoughts.

“Tell him,” he orders.

“You can’t be my dad anymore. He’s my dad now.” She pulls the knife out and looks the dying man firmly in the eyes. “I’m a Lecter, not a Hobbs.”

Hannibal moves silently across the kitchen, his bare feet stepping on the plastic drop cloth he’s placed on the floor under the kitchen table.

“Don’t be frightened of the blood. Blood means life.” He produces a bowl he’d tucked away and swiftly uses it to collect blood from the draining body; another vessel he retrieves contains warmed milk, which he slowly mixes into the bowl, swirling the white into a thick spiral through the heavy crimson. “In the culture of the Maasai, fresh blood from the jugular vein is mixed with raw milk for the sick to drink. It is said to make the body stronger and warmer.”

“Am I sick?” she asks, her small fist still clutching the knife.
“No. You are reborn.” He holds the bowl to her lips and smiles to Misha, his little sister. “Warm up and become strong.”

*****///*****

It takes Bedelia forty-one days before she calls in her favour.

Hannibal is watching the original ‘The Day The Earth Stood Still’ with his daughter, a bowl of popcorn sitting forgotten on the coffee table, as they cuddle together on the couch. His arm is wrapped around her shoulder and he’s explaining the film as it progresses so she can appreciate what she’s watching. Halfway through, his cellphone rings. Etiquette would dictate he leave the room, but he’s too comfortable to move and after pausing the film—“So I can talk to your Aunt Bedelia, Abigail.”—he answers his cellphone.

“Hello, Hannibal. How are you?”

“I’m well. And yourself?”

“I’m well. And how is my beautiful niece?”

Hannibal knows she wants something as he usually has to remind her about Abigail’s existence. “She is also well.”

Her voice is warm. “I’m so glad to hear that. She’s so lucky to have a person like you for a parent.”

His lips quirk somewhat, curious to find out what she has that she wants. “Thank you.”

“She would look so pretty dressed in pink, standing by your side,” she continues.

“Are you planning on buying Abigail a new dress, Bedelia?” he asks amusedly and his daughter perks up, turning to look at him curiously.

“I think she’s still young enough where the pink would work to your benefit. Voters love when their governor is a family man and Abigail is so photogenic.”

Hannibal is surprised that of all things she wants from him is to see him as governor. “Certainly you are already satisfied with Mr Verger? He seems to be fulfilling your agenda rather well.”

“He’s a paedophile.”

Hannibal stiffens slightly, his hand unconsciously pulling Abigail closer to him in a protective gesture. “I was unaware.”

Abigail snuggles closer to him as Bedelia parts with minimal information, the closest she’s ever been to saying that she’s made a mistake. “There’s an investigation going on right now. He should be arrested by the end of the week.”

Hannibal fills in the blank quickly. ‘Which means he won’t running next year.’

“All that’s needed of you is to quit your job at Kick’s,” she continues. “I’ve already done all the rest of the work. I simply need you to fill the seat.”

“Are there no others to make into Manchurian Candidates, Bedelia? Do you think it befitting I should be your puppet? I deserve more than that.” He processes the anger quickly that she would dare try to relegate him to some role where he does nothing more than take her orders.
Her voice is tender, because perhaps he is the only one she’d ever understood how to love. “Oh, Hannibal. You misunderstand. You’ll be the one making the decisions. I want you there because I trust your political motives are the same as mine. If there was ever someone meant to carry the family’s legacy, it’s us.”

He relaxes, rereading the situation. “You believe it destiny, then.”

“I prayed for years to Uncle Jack that he might send me someone who would be worthy of joining me on my chosen path. And then you were brought to me. My perfect other half. Uncle Jack delivered you to me.” Her voice ends in a fierce hiss, and he is finds it regrettable he can’t be with her in person to see her face. Her voice regains composure. “He’s given you a daughter. He’s given you the life you’ve wanted. But now you must accept what he needs you to do. Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

Hannibal smiles, reciting ‘amen’ along with her silently. If it is her intention to crown him as a king, then he shall accept it. He has his Mischa, after all, and there is nothing left for him to want. This is just an evolution of their life together and a new game to master.

“And if I don’t win?”

She laughs and he knows that with her hand in this, the only outcome is winning. “I’m sending someone over to meet with you tonight. Jack Crawford, my campaign manager.”

*****

The dinner dishes have been washed and dried as he teaches Abigail the lyrics to their favourite hymn. She isn’t especially skilled in German, but there is no rush for her to know it all just yet. They continue the lesson as they eat dessert and she listens as he explains the words to her and then as he washes the dessert dishes by himself, she stands by the counter, warbling along to the song as it plays on loop. It’s nearing her bedtime and knowing just how to bribe her, offers her a chance to sleep over in his room if she’s willing to meet someone who’s coming over tonight. He wants to see how this Mr Crawford treats his daughter and how she reacts to him. Abigail is only too happy to agree and together they plot out all she has to do to get her reward.

At almost nine, the doorbell rings and assured everything has been set up according to his needs for the night, he goes to answer. A man perhaps a few years older than him stands on the doorstep, well dressed and holding out his hand.

“You must be Hannibal. I’m Jack Crawford, Bedelia’s campaign advisor.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr Crawford.” Hannibal shakes hands with him, then stands aside. “Please come in.”

He leads the man to the room he uses as his office, allowing him to wander about the room as he studies him. Crawford comes to stop in front of desk, his hands flitting to the smooth vegetable vellum sheets Hannibal had been drawing on.

“Very nice, very nice. You draw all this from memory?” he asks, studying the architecture on the page.

“Yes.” He glances down at the clean lines and precise angles. “The manor in Paris where I lived as a boy.”

“Outstanding.” Crawford glances up and looks to the doorway where Abigail stands, right on cue. “And you must be Abigail.”
Abigail smiles. “Hello.”

“I’m Jack.”

Abigail stands slightly behind Hannibal, shyness overtaking her.

“What do you say when meeting someone new, Abigail?” he asks softly, reminding her of her manners.

“It’s nice to meet you. My name is Abigail Lecter,” she introduces herself politely. “Are you one of Daddy’s friends?”

“He is your Aunt Bedelia’s campaign advisor,” Hannibal explains quickly.

Crawford’s smile is gap-toothed. “I hope I’ll be one of his friends.”

She grins back at him, still hanging onto Hannibal’s side.

“Why don’t you go practise your song, Abigail?” he suggests.

“Yes, Daddy.”

She parts from him and hurries out of the office, no doubt excited that she’s earned her special privileges for the night.

“She’s doing well,” Crawford comments and Hannibal agrees.

“She is.”

Crawford studies Hannibal’s doctorate hanging up behind his desk. “So Bedelia tells me that you want to be the governor.”

“By her grace I’ll be elected.”

“You’re democrat?”

“Of course.”

“And your political beliefs line up with hers? I just need to know how to market you.”

“Identical.”

Crawford nods. “I’ve never run a single parent before, but I don’t think that’ll be a problem. You’re definitely not my first Catholic—mind if I sit?”

Hannibal gestures to the armchair Crawford stands closest to. “Please. May I offer you a brandy?”

“Not tonight, thanks.” He looks at him curiously. “You’ve never been involved in politics?”

Hannibal is aware that Crawford doesn’t understand why he’s here other than by Bedelia’s orders.

“I’m afraid not. I felt that it was best to leave that career path to my cousin and her family.”

Crawford gives him a look. “That’s a funny way of wording it.”

“By definition, I am not actually Bedelia’s cousin. She was my Uncle Robertas’ niece by marriage. But we were raised as such,” Hannibal explains.
“You’re a pseudo-Kennedy. Nothing wrong with that. Many people would be happy to be in your place.” He glances back at the desk and the framed degree. “Surgeon, artist—is there anything you can’t do?”

Hannibal smiles, accepting the flattering and Crawford clears his throat.

“What I’m asking is, ‘What do I need to know that I’m not going to want on the front page of the Baltimore Herald’?”

Hannibal’s smile disappears. “Nothing.”

“Nothing. That’s what everyone says.” Jack’s smile is patronising and Hannibal pretends he’s not aware. “I need you to be completely honest with me. I’m already going to back you—I just need to know what your vices are. Hookers, drugs…”

“Do you think I am a man swayed by those things, Mr Crawford?”

“All of us have our deep dark secrets.”

Hannibal chuckles. “They aren’t secret, Jack. I am an honest man.”

“Bedelia…told me that you’re complex. But genuine.”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “She called me that?”

“Yes. Are you surprised?”

“It is a high compliment from my cousin. She is someone I admire greatly.”

“Bedelia could be president one day if she wants. I plan on getting her there. I want a Kennedy back in the White House,” Crawford tells him.

“Bedelia would never want to be president, I assure you.”

Sizing him up, the other man tries to get answers from Hannibal again. “Drunk driving? Hit and run?”

“Neither.” Hannibal has no sins to bring to light. “I assure you, Mr Crawford, that there is nothing you need to worry about.”

Crawford smiles as though the joke’s on Hannibal. “If you say so.”

Will sits numbly in his living room, staring into the empty fireplace with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and Beau’s head against his left. He’s just heard about Verger—Freddie Lounds ‘Tattler’ article in the Gotham Tribune the first to report about the atrocities committed by the governor of Maryland—and Will’s disconnected the phone, pulled the curtains, and locked the door. He doesn’t expect too much in terms of harassment by reporters, but he doesn’t want anyone who knows him to come over thinking he has a desire to discuss what’s happened.

He doesn’t want to leave the house, he doesn’t want to eat, he can hardly bear the thought he’s going to have to show up to GWU on Monday and get stared at by all his colleagues, all his classmates. Everyone there knows he was the key to success for Verger and admittedly he was proud of his work there—polishing a socialite into a leader. It was something no one else could manage as smoothly as he did.
How could he have let this happen? All those opportunities for Verger to be around children, all of that money to shut people up, if only he’d insisted on being around Verger, he could have seen it then! Actually, he would have felt it, but at least he would have known, and oh god, he got Verger elected.

He shivers.

He will never do this again. He will never put anyone into a position of power where they can just hurt people, hurt vulnerable people that they should be protecting. That’s it. He’s done. He doesn’t care who’s put in front of him, he won’t be assisting anyone ever again.

*****

Hannibal sits on a chair by the bathtub in Abigail’s bathroom, watching the six year old girl play with her Barbie dolls.

“Abigail, you must learn to wash your own hair,” he scolds gently as he tries to get her to lean her head back long enough to rinse the lather out of her long hair.

“It’s so much easier when you do it, though! I get the shampoo in my eyes!” she complains, which is an incredibly weak argument for her to make.

“I have showed you how to wash your hair out. You aren’t trying to put it to practical application,” he insists. “Would it be easier if you used the shower in my bathroom?”

“I can’t play with my dolls in the shower,” she says in a tone that suggests she can’t believe he’s not considering that.

He blames paternal love for the reason he’s arguing with a six year old, because it is quite possibly the most pointless thing he’s ever done willingly. “Bath time is not for playing Abigail. It is for getting clean.”

“I’m multitasking.”

Hannibal momentarily regrets teaching her that word as she has taken to using it as an excuse for playing while she does everything.

“Put down your odalisque—“

“She’s a princess,” she corrects.

“Put down your princess and wash your hair.”

She attempts looking at him covertly and he knows she’s trying to see what she can get out of the arrangement, bless her heart. “Can I put on Mother’s jewellery afterwards?”

It’s hardly the grand ransom he was expecting, but he doesn’t tell her that. “Of course.”

“Okay.” And before he can correct her, she corrects herself. “I mean, yes, I’ll wash my hair.”

He beams at her and hands over the melamine cup with roses to allow her to start pouring the hot water over her head.

*****

Abigail is seven and Hannibal decides to reward her with a night out at the opera. He buys her a new
dress and shoes, spending the early part of the evening curling her hair with a curling iron Bedelia
brings over, allowing her to put on a tinted lip balm, and he presents her with her first diamonds,
small earrings that adorn her pierced ears tastefully. They have dinner at the only Michelin rated
restaurant in Baltimore—she offering a delightful, if innocent conversation on caterpillars, and they
split a tayberry brûlée (too much sugar, not enough fruit) before arriving at the opera house.

She lasts through the first two acts, glancing up at him occasionally to which he gives her a
reassuring smile, very proud that her etiquette is better than half of the attending adults and finds
himself planning for future symphonies and shows instead of entirely indulging in the music as he is
accustomed to. But during act three she squirms beside him, her frown betraying her discomfort. He
leans his head down to hers and whispers his warning gently,

“Abigail, you must sit still.”

She looks up at him, her small hands grabbing at his and she whispers back, “Daddy, please can we
be done?”

Something lights inside him—fury being doused with paternal love for her and he nods. “Yes, my
flower. Let’s leave as quietly as we can.”

She quickly stands up and clings to him, her eyes filled with relief. “Thank you.”

They retrieve their coats at the coat check, Abigail proudly handing over the tag she’d been keeping
in the small silk handbag Bedelia had allowed her to take from her own closet. The valet brings the
Bentley around to the front and he carefully secures her in her booster seat in the back before they
drive off. He watches her in the rearview mirror and she stares back at him. She’s quiet, and he can
see the shame in her expression. She knows she’s disappointed him and he is grateful, because that’s
the first step in correcting her behavior.

“Abigail, may I ask what you didn’t like about tonight’s show?” He keeps his tone neutral as always,
betraying none of his irritation that he’s left Puccini’s ‘La bohème’.

“I…” Her eyes avoid his now. “I didn’t understand what they were singing. It was too fancy for me
to understand.”

“It’s not in English, Abigail. It’s Italian.”

Her eyes meet his again. “Like spaghetti?”

He smiles, amused at the connexions her mind has made. “Like spaghetti,” he agrees.

“I’m sorry I made us leave.”

He wants to tell her that once he killed an opera goer in the parking lot for sneezing twice during an
otherwise perfect rendition of ‘I Medici’, that he’d tore the woman’s tongue out with his own teeth
then cut off all the remaining bite marks, that he’d sliced off her nose to shame her and left her bled
out next to her Porsche.

But instead he nods once and makes eye contact with her in the rearview mirror. “It’s all right. I
understand you might not appreciate the opera to its fullest extent at your age. Thank you for staying
as long as you could tolerate and thank you for using your words like an adult instead of throwing a
fit like a child.”

She looks proud of herself for handling her nature properly and he knows she’ll be less inclined to
repeat her actions from tonight if only to continue impressing him.
“Can we play tour guide?” she asks hopefully.

“Would you like that, Abigail?”

“Yes!” Her legs swing and the heels of her shoes thump against the leather of the backseat.

“Don’t kick the seats, Abigail,” he reminds her.

“Sorry,” she apologises.

His right hand leaves the steering wheel to turn on the car’s cd player. “What shall we listen to, Abigail? Mozart or Chopin?”

“Claude Dubussy, please!” she chirps.

“An excellent choice,” he praises.

Abigail falls asleep during their drive down Aliceanne Street, her head tipped to the side and breathing light. Hannibal wonders how anyone could ever hurt their child—she has done things that infuriate him to the point he sees red and yet he is powerless to the instinct to please her and teach her how to be more like him. He smiles as he watches her in the rearview mirror, changing the course of their trip to return them home.

Once in the house, he carries her to her bedroom, waking her enough to help her out of her clothes and into her pyjamas. He manages to convince her to brush her teeth and wash her face, her eyes hardly open, then he leads her to her bed and she crawls under the warm blankets. As he tucks her in, she murmurs,

“I love you,”

exhaling the words so softly that he sees them on her lips more than hears them. He kisses her once on the forehead and then again on the cheek, reverent of the power she holds over him.

“Goodnight, my beloved.”

*****

Abigail doesn’t remember how she got in the back seat of her daddy’s car or why she’s wearing the poofy turquoise dress that she’s only allowed to wear to his dinner parties. He’s wearing his leather driving gloves and she has on the lacy ones she wears to Mass, which seems funny to her and she giggles as he opens up the back door to take her out of the car seat. The car is so warm and she feels so sleepy, her eyes open but unable to focus on anything. Her daddy nuzzles her cheek and murmurs into her ear that they’re going to play a game tonight, but she cuts him off and kisses him on the nose, grinning at him.

Lifted into his strong arms, he carries her through an alley way out onto a sidewalk. There are brownstones and he selects one, walking up to the door and knocking on it twice. Her daddy reminds her to keep her gloves on at all times and she wonders what the special occasion is.

When the door opens, a man with a pretty face answers and her father greets him with a soothing voice. “Hello, Mr Verger.”

The man’s eyes are wide and his cheeks flushed. “Hello, Dr Lecter. And who’s this?

“This is my daughter Abigail,” her daddy says and she remembers her manners to greet him as well.
“Hi.”

The man cocks his head, looking her directly in the eyes. “What’s wrong with her?”

“I’ve given her something to relax her.”

The man smiles at her, touching the hem of her dress. “You’re very pretty.”

“That’s what my daddy tells me,” she says proudly, her fingers playing with the dimple in his tie.

“May we come in?” her daddy asks and the man quickly stands aside at the doorway.

“Please.” As he shuts the door behind them, the man gestures for them to enter his sitting room. “I must admit that I was a little surprised to receive your call this afternoon. You’ve had me in a bit of a fluster.”

Her daddy always knows the right things to say. “You look rather handsome, Mr Verger.”

“Please, call me Mason.” The man’s cheeks have turned a light pink and in the low light she thinks he looks like one of the painted angels in the guest room at home. “And Abigail, you look beautiful, too. Is that a bruise on your leg?”

“Yes. Daddy gave it to me,” she said proudly.

She remembers it very clearly—this morning as she sat on the edge of his desk, he’d told her that it would be part of a disguise and she’d watched curiously as his thumb had pressed against her skin, eager to see what colour it would turn—a present that wouldn’t reveal its true self until much later in the day. She’d asked if she could give him a bruise, too, and he’d agreed, sporting a small mark on the inside of his ankle where she’d been able to get a good grip on him with her small hand.

The man’s smile broadens and he leans in a little closer to him. “Did your Daddy kiss it all better?”

She nods, grinning and burying her face against her daddy’s neck.

Her daddy shifts her in his hold. “I wanted to have a night of fun with Abigail and then I thought you might be lonely and want to have fun with us, too.”

“Together?” The man sounds almost breathless and Abigail whips her head around to look at his stunned face.

“Together, Mason,” her daddy agrees.

The man licks his lips hungrily as he looks at her daddy, then returns his attention to her. “What would you do for a chocolate?”

“Daddy doesn’t let me have candy,” Abigail says firmly, because she knows this is a test and she won’t let her daddy down.

“No, thank you.” She is very polite.

The man touches one of her hands sweetly. “What do you want?”

She thinks of the pretty new tennis bracelet her Aunt Bee wore the other morning during Mass. “Diamonds.”
The man laughs, shocked and he gives her another smile. “Is that what your daddy gives you?”

She returns his smile with one of her own. “He gives me anything I ask for.”

She spots a pair of dog beds in front of the fireplace and she quickly asks, ‘Do you have dogs?”

“I do. Two of them.” He starts to gesture for her to come with him towards a hallway branching off from the sitting room. “Would you like to see them?”

Her daddy—however—does not let go of her. “Call them in, Mason.”

The man looks a little disappointed, but does as he’s told. Two large dogs like the kind police officers use come bounding in, sniffing her all over as she giggles and pets their heads before her daddy sets her down, allowing her to stand beside him.

“They’re trained to love kids,” the man says to her daddy and she feels the hold around her hand loosen slightly.

Seemingly satisfied with the dogs’ personalities, she’s allowed to play with them and she kneels, petting them both as they eagerly sniff at her, their tails wagging. She laughs as one tries to lick her face and she turns to look up at her daddy; he’s smiling at his eyes look like her princess’, dark waiting voids that could swallow them all whole.

“Mason, would you like a popper?” he asks the pretty man, holding out something in his hand as she returns her attention to the dogs.

“You’re not…?”

“One of us should remain sober.”

She can hear the inhaling sharply through the man’s nose and after a moment says, “Oh, wow. I like this.”

Her daddy sounds pleased. “I have other things that you might find equally enjoyable.”

“I feel like a kid in a candy store,” he coos.

Her daddy turns and smiles at her. “Remember, this is our secret, Abigail.”

“Do you have a lot of secrets with your daddy?” the man asks.

She simply smiles; her daddy already explained to her that it’s a secret that they have secrets. The man moves into her daddy’s arms, swaying and pressing their bodies close; her daddy gives her a look that makes it obvious she’s not supposed to look and she returns to playing with the dogs, remembering to keep her gloves on.

“How do you feel about choking?” the man asks.

“Are you a fan of auto-erotic asphyxiation, Mason?”

“I love it. I have a fixture in my room. Can I show you?” the man tries to reach for her and her daddy instead takes him by the hand, threading their fingers together.

“We’ll call for her in a moment. Why don’t we let her play with the dogs?” her daddy suggests.

She watches the man playing with the tie her daddy wears and her smile vanishes, watching him
pulling the tie out of her daddy’s jacket to pull on it and lead him up the stairs as if it’s a leash. She watches with narrowed eyes, but is quickly distracted by one of the dogs nuzzling her face. She makes them shake hands with her and she gives them kisses on their noses, her mind dizzy and still trying to fathom why they’re here tonight.

“Abigail,” her father calls out and the other man sings out, “Abigaaaaail!”

Walking on her own is hard and she stumbles to the staircase, crawling up it on hands and knees, wobbling when she reaches the top; the man calls out again, his voice light and friendly, and she calls back with an eager, “I’m going to find you! Keep singing!” and he laughs and laughs and laughs until she locates the bedroom by the sound of his voice, standing in the doorway and blinking as she takes in the unusual tableau.

“What are you doing?” she asks curiously.

The man is standing in the centre of the room with a very long black leather strap around his neck, the other end in her daddy’s hands.

“Mr Verger likes to have things tied around his neck,” her father explains.

She leans against the doorframe, head spinning. “Like a dog?”

“Like a noose.”

She remembers that game from her tutors. “Hangman?”

“Yes, Abigail. Come sit here.” He helps her over to an armchair facing the middle of the room, explaining, “It’s going to be a show.”

“I like shows,” she says, knowing how operas and symphonies are a special gift for her to enjoy.

“Should we…?” the man tugs slightly at the black leather strap between them.

Abigail lies her head on the stuffed arm of the chair her father has sat her in. Her whole body feels sleepy and her legs swing back and forth slowly, not touching the ground. Her father's voice sounds like its in a tunnel, very far away and she huffs softly as she watches the man he's talking to stand up on a chair, tying the strap to the ceiling.

“Abigail, would you like to call in the dogs?” her daddy offers.

The pretty man’s eyes go wide and he laughs. “Dogs, too? Do you like having an audience, Dr Lecter?”

Her daddy laughs quietly. “It is one of my greatest joys to have others enjoy my art.”

“Is that what you call this? Art?”

Her daddy’s smile broadens. “It will be.”

Abigail whistles for the dogs at her daddy’s prompting and she listens as their long nails scratch at the wood floor downstairs and at their pounding feet as they gallop up the stairs and down the hallway to the bedroom. The two big dogs that the man owns are sitting by her daddy’s feet, watching their master curiously.

"Daddy, I want a dog."
He turns to look at her with his red eyes and he smiles at her. "Not tonight, my love."

He pulls a sharp doctor knife out of his pocket and hands it to the man on the chair. She perks up (she likes doctor knives a lot) and forces her eyes open wider.

“Mason, wouldn't it be funny to cut off your face?” he asks.

Abigail begins to giggle, squirming on the chair and watching the dogs turn to look at her. The man looks at her with wide eyes, licking his dry lips.

Her daddy continues. “Look at how funny Abigail thinks it is.”

Abigail begins to giggle louder and her daddy smiles fondly at her.

“Would you?” she asks sleepily. “I’d like to see what it looks like underneath.”

She imagines that beneath his face is a halloween skull, white bone packaged in smooth skin, like candy in a wrapper. The man takes the knife in one hand and begins to snake the other down to the front of his pants.

"Not yet,” her father orders and she frowns, wondering what he’s talking about but doesn’t dwell on it much longer as her father begins to hum, coaxing the man to start cutting.

Abigail recognises the song as the one he sings to her and she begins to dreamily sing out the words. The man nods his head and lifts the knife to his face, slicing a thick line down the side of his cheek. Abigail's voice hitches for a moment as she watches his flesh open up, peeling under the blade. It’s like his skin is a rose petal on the other side, brilliant red and soft.

“Abigail, do you think the dogs are hungry?” her daddy asks kindly as she continues singing.

She nods her head, watching in fascination as the man twists on the end of the rope, cutting in time to the melody she and her father share. Her lips curl in a smile as her daddy begins to slip the pieces of meat to the dogs, who snap it up eagerly.

“Let’s peel off your whole face and feed it to the dogs, shall we?” her daddy suggests and the man begins to slice off more and more.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” she asks as the man tries to sing loudly.

Her daddy comes over to where she’s sitting and lifts her up so that he may sit in the chair to watch, allowing her to settle onto his lap. “Mr Verger only understands pain, Abigail.”

“Because he’s bad?”

“Very.”

Abigail smiles again. She likes it when the bad people are hurt.

“He looks so ugly,” she whispers into her daddy’s ear, trying not to smile too much because that might be rude.

“He looks uglier inside.” He smiles back at her. “Let’s break his neck and go home. It’s past your bedtime.”

“Okay.”
The man is laughing insanely and slicing wildly at his face; the front of his shirt is soaked in blood and the smell of it is sharp. Her daddy comes up behind the man, standing on a chair of his own; his hands come up behind the man’s head and twist. She flinches at the strange sound and the man’s body goes limp, swinging from the end of rope, eyes rolling wildly as he continues laughing, a very wet sound. Her daddy picks up the knife that falls from the man’s hand, wrapping it up in a cloth from his jacket’s inner pocket. She gets up from the chair, stumbling slightly.

“Aren’t we going to take anything?” she asks, looking at the man curiously.

Her daddy’s hand takes hers. “No. This is not worthy of our dinner table.”

When they get home, which was a fairly blurry event, he has them change out of their clothing and he allows her to sit in front of the fireplace in his bedroom in her underwear, watching the flames of their burning clothes as he gets her pyjamas. She curls her arms around her knees, not blinking as the heat on her eyeballs makes them dry. Her daddy speaks softly, words that instruct her to get dressed in the pyjamas he’s brought in for her, but she doesn’t want to. As she watches the dress burn in the fireplace, she thinks about how one day she’ll be taller and stronger and she’ll be able to make men let her play with their dogs while she has them cut off their faces. She’s sad about the loss of the dress and pinches her fingers on the bruise her daddy had given her. At least she can keep that for now.

As he helps her into her pyjamas, muttering something against her scalp about ‘a miscalculated dosage’, his voice cherishing and smile on his lips, he seems to sense her sadness about the dress and he lovingly promises to purchase her a new one. She tilts her head sleepily against his shoulder as he lifts her up of the floor and carries her over to his bed. He’s so strong and warm, his night shirt smelling like lavender. He asks her what colour she wants and she doesn’t know what he’s talking about, so she pretends she doesn’t hear him as he stretches her out onto bed, tucking her in on the side closest to the windows. He turns the lights out and climbs into the bed beside her.

The pillow is wonderfully cool against her cheek, forgiving and clean. He repeats his question again and she sighs at the pleasure of a warm bed and his attention. She thinks of the colour of the man’s skin as it peeled away from his face, the way his laughter was so loud and delighted, of the blood that had run down his hands and pooled over the floor, staining the carpet in thick splashes. She imagines if she asks her father to cut away the bruise he gave her to see the secrets underneath, it will look just as beautiful. Powerful and full of life that she has earned.

Her eyes flutter shut and she asks for red.

***///***

When Abigail is seven, she receives private tutoring instead of attending a school; Hannibal knows she is not emotionally ready to be around people and he hopes to improve her intellect after the vast disservice her time at the Keedysville Elementary School has done. She hadn’t even known how to read cursive before him!

On Wednesday afternoons she takes private art lessons with a fairly well known local artist; Hannibal has seen monumental improvement in her drawing abilities and he hopes one day she will be able to create pieces as detailed and precise as his.

He picks his daughter up at the artist’s home after he finishes work at the governor’s office, slightly past five-thirty, and allows her to carry the archival tube that holds her work for the day. Carefully helping her into her booster seat, strapping her in safely, they wave at the artist standing in the doorway, and drive away.
“Look what I did today!” She holds up a water colour and pastel drawing of people leaping about, her first finished piece of artwork.

“How lovely. Are those the dancers you saw last week at the park?” he asks, glancing away to watch traffic.

“Yes! When we get home, will you put it up on the fridge?” she chirps, apparently very proud of what she’s made.

He hesitates just long enough that she saw he didn’t want to and her happiness falls away immediately, leaving her with pain; almost embarrassed that he is that readable to his child, he quickly tells her, “I have no magnets for the fridge, Abigail. We shall see if they have any at the grocery store.”

Relief floods her features as she believes his lie and he smiles reassuringly to her.

And after a lifetime of hating the cluttered appearances of refrigerators being used as bulletin boards, he finds that the doors of his have become acquisitions for Abigail’s art and report cards, all very careful arranged so that it looked neat. He draws the line at posting photographs (“That’s what picture frames are for, Abigail.”) and magnets that didn’t fit his kitchen’s aesthetics, but he supposes there are worse things in life. As she grows older, her art becomes more sophisticated and despite the fact she no longer takes art classes, the refrigerator doors do seem oddly blank when he takes down the few pieces of art he allows her to proudly display. As the drawings and paintings get rotated out, he carefully stores each one in an archival box that he keeps in his home office; on rare occasions when Abigail is staying the night at someone else’s house, he takes the box out and looks over her work. None of them are his taste and yet, he cannot help but love them. Within his memory palace, he has a hallway entirely dedicated to her artwork, a private gallery that he uses as an entryway into the part of the dreamscape he shares with her.

Abigail is seven and so enthusiastic to be just like him, which as of late has included a desire to cook. He’s awoken early one morning on the weekend to the sound of metal mixing bowls clanging against one another. He dresses in pyjamas and a dressing gown, walking barefoot into the kitchen where he finds his daughter.

“Are you hungry, Abigail?” A slight pang of guilt hits him that he’s not fed his child.

“I’m making breakfast for you. Go back to bed so I can surprise you,” she orders him, her little hands determinedly beating a few eggs with a spoon in a mixing bowl.

“What are you making?” he asks curiously, his fingers lingering on her shoulders as he observes the mess she’s making on the counter with dirty forks, extra bowls, and an apple that she’s tried to peel.

“Toast and eggs. I don’t know how to make pancakes without mix,” she explains.

“I’ll show you later how to make them.”

“Go back to bed! You’re ruining the surprise!” she complains, her forehead wrinkling in frustration.

He kisses the crown of her head and does as she wishes. “Yes, my flower.”

He leaves the door cracked slightly so as to monitor what his daughter is doing by sound. For fifteen minutes he lays in bed, curious and deciding that next time she tries to surprise him with food he’ll watch. She deserves an audience for her creativity, after all. Finally he can hear her footsteps
approaching and he shuts his eyes.

“Wake up, Daddy,” she sings as she walks through the door.

He feigned waking up and gives her a sleepy smile. “Hello, Abigail.”

“I made you breakfast.” She brings the tray over to his bedside and he realises with a sinking feeling she wasn’t going to serve him in the dining room or even the kitchen.

“To eat in bed.”

She nods enthusiastically and he quickly puts a smile on his lips.

“Why don’t you give me the tray and you can open the bedroom curtains,” he suggests and she does as she’s told.

Had they been made by anyone other than Abigail, the eggs would have been considered atrocious and too oily. Additionally, the toast is cold and the butter had been hard when applied as well so it’s smashed the bread and clumped in certain areas. There is also a small fan of butchered apple slices, warmed and tasting of olive oil due to their contact with the eggs. But Abigail sits on the bed, grinning ear to ear as she watches him eat, eager to please him and he didn’t disappoint.

“This is the best breakfast I’ve had in a long time, Abigail,” he lies, with every bite stealing more and more of her heart.

*****

Hannibal finds the most trying part of parenthood is trying to reason with Abigail’s ‘normal’ traits. Odd characteristics he never possessed such as child, that frustrate him now because he simply can’t understand how she can be so perfect in many ways and yet still so undisciplined. Perhaps if she hadn’t been given any form of stability so soon after her traumatic upheaval from her former life, she would have developed it quicker. But Hannibal supposes there are other ways to cultivate such characteristics in the child that is his.

He sits on the edge of her bed, one leg crossed over the other, taking slow measured breaths as his eyes follow her around her bedroom. She’s cleaning up the horrendous mess she’d made while he worked on dinner in the kitchen; he couldn’t blame her as he had not checked up on as often as he should have. She was still too young to trust completely with responsibilities, alas. But wasn’t that a luxury he could afford her? She could keep secrets and that was what mattered.

“What about that sock, Abigail?” he asks.

She huffs, but trudges over to the sock on the floor and carries it over to the hamper in her bathroom.

“Very good. What about your paint brushes?”

She returns them to her easel and lifts her head as the doorbell rings.

“Please continue cleaning while I go to answer the door,” he instructs.

“Yes, Daddy,” she says obediently.

At the door is his cousin, dressed elegantly as always and as he leans in to kiss her cheek, he can smell she’s already eaten before coming here.

“Bedelia, how are you?” he asks as he takes her coat.
“I’m well. And you?”

He looks her over. “Hungry.”

Abigail is at his side before anything more can be said. “Aunt Bee!”

Hannibal frowns. “Abigail, I told you to continue cleaning your room while I answered the door.”

“But she’s here for dinner.”

Hannibal shakes his head. “We cannot start dinner until you are finished.”

For a moment he thinks she is going to throw a hideous fit like a spoilt brat, but instead she runs back towards her bedroom. Knowing full well she will try to stuff and hide the rest of her belongings, he follows after her, Bedelia trailing not far behind.

“What about the books on the floor?”

They’re gathered quickly and arranged according to the order only she can understand, perhaps by spine width, he supposes.

“Very good. What about your coloured pencils.”

She collects them and returns them to the tin, so he reinforces her good actions.

“Very good.”

Bedelia looked at him curiously and then begins to mimic him. “Very good.”

Abigail cocks her head slightly then lifts up a sweater off the floor. “I don’t want this anymore.”

“Put it in your charity basket, then,” he instructs.

The sweater is taken to a small basket in the closet that often fills with clothing and toys they take to the church as donations.

“Very good,” Bedelia praises and Abigail beams, happy to have her aunt’s approval.

****

“Abigail,” he murmurs as his eight year old daughter stands in the doorway.

He can smell the fear in her—a mixture of sweat and adrenaline. He’s been listening to her half-coherent crying, the eerie noise of someone trapped in a nightmare and calling to the outside world for help. And then as he’d finally sat up to come for her, he’d heard her feet walking across hallway to his room. She’s most likely made herself emotional over the fact she’ll be attending school for the first time since he adopted her. Neither of them are truly ready for her to be back among the living, but he’s already compartmentalised the situation as best as he can.

“I had a bad dream,” she croaks; even from this distance he can see that her face is wet with tears.

“You’re getting too old for this.” He finds himself feeling cruel—perhaps he hasn’t compartmentalised as much as he thought.

Even in the shadows of the dark room he can see how heartbroken she looks, as though she couldn’t imagine anything more hurtful than his rejection. “Do you want me to go?”
“No.” He opens his arms to her and she hurries to join him on the bed, letting him embrace her. “What was your dream about?”

“I was in the hospital, in the bed. You were still a doctor and you had me hooked up to machines, saying I wasn’t going to make it. I told you that I was—” she starts to cry again and he rocks her until she’s calmed herself enough to continue. “I told you I was going to be okay, that you’d make me all better, but you said you didn’t want to. That it would take too much time. And I asked you why you were mad at me and you said you didn’t want to waste your time on a rube.”

He smiles slightly into her hair; he’d taught her that word yesterday.

“I asked when you’d take me home and that I’d be good, I’d be better, but you said you didn’t want me, that you liked living alone. And when you started walking away, I was calling out for you, saying ‘Daddy! Daddy!’ but you wouldn’t turn around and look at me. You left me there and turned out the lights and locked the door.” She clings to him, trembling.

Pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead, he assures her that this could never happen. “I’m sorry that you had such a wicked dream, Abigail. You understand I’d never abandon you, don’t you?”

“I would never leave you, either,” she whispers.

“Lie back,” he instructs; she rolls onto her back to look up at him as he places his hand over her throat, feeling her swallow beneath his palm.

“Jesus bleibet meine Freude…meines Herzens Trost und Saft…Jesus wehret allem Leide…er ist meines Lebens Kraft.” He looks into her eyes, large lipid pools barely visible in the dark of his room. “meiner Augen Lust und Sonne…meiner Seele Schatz und Wonne; darum laß’ ich Jesum nicht, aus dem Herzen und Gesicht.”

Abigail eventually drifts into a peaceful sleep and Hannibal lies back down, turning to his side and closing his eyes.

*****

“You’re distracted, Hannibal,” Bedelia states, sitting on the edge of his desk as he stands by the window. Congress is out yet again in Washington and his cousin has come to take him out to lunch at a nearby restaurant. Alana waits in the sitting room outside his office. “Abigail is at a good school.”

He can’t stop thinking about her without him, her dream haunting him more than it should. “I would much prefer to have her by my side.”

“She needs an education. Sidwell is a good place, you know that. And you can’t isolate her. Isolating isn’t healthy for anyone.”

He raises an eyebrow. “We isolate ourselves, have we not?”

“And we have one another to speak to. Let her interact with humans. Let her see all the ants to be stepped on.” She plays with the watch on her wrist. “She’s just a child, Hannibal. Let her explore her sense of self first. Then show her who she is.”

“We should have cake for her when she gets home. A treat for surviving her first day of school,” he muses, sensing that his cousin wishes to prey on his current vulnerabilities; he can afford to allow her this time.
“Surviving is a strong word.”

“She has experienced much trauma in her life. Being on her own with those little beasts is something I’d consider an experience to survive.”

There is a slight smirk on her lips. “Beasts, Hannibal?”

“You called them ‘ants’.”

Bedelia stands from the desk, admitting to nothing as she adjusts cuffs on her blouse. “Come, Hannibal. Let’s go have something to eat.”

*****

Abigail is trying not to cry, not wanting to show the nasty kids here that she’s weak on her own. They’ve spent the entire morning heckling her because of her scarf and because she still calls her father ‘daddy’ like a baby. It’s her first day here at this fancy school her father signed her up to, that Aunt Bee had once attended and she wants to love it, but the people here are just hateful. Everyone already has their own friends and she’s the outsider.

A tall girl stands in front of her. “The other kids are stupid. My cousin wears a scarf on her head because she’s Jewish. Are you Jewish?”

Abigail shakes her head, thinking of what her daddy told her about church. “No, I’m Catholic.”

“Oh, okay.” The girl smiles at her. “My name’s Marissa.”

“I’m Abigail.” She doesn’t want to alienate someone else and quickly explains, “I wear this scarf to cover my neck.”

The other girl looks curious. “Is that what Catholics do?”

Abigail is a Lecter and lying is like breathing. “Yes.”

“I think it’s very pretty. And the other kids are stupid,” Marissa insists firmly. “Want to play tetherball?”

Abigail smiles. This girl seems kind and within her, Abigail spots the seed of trust that would be so easy to nurture in her own favour. Marissa is pretty, like her princess at home.

“What’s tetherball?” she asks, pretending not to know.

“What’s tetherball?” Marissa crows. “Oh man, come on! Lemme show you!”

*****

It’s 2003, a very rainy November evening. Barney stands on the side of the road, his mouth tasting like blood from where he’d hit his face on the dashboard and knocked two of his teeth out. It’s pouring rain and the car that had caused he and his sister to run off the road into a steep embankment is no where in sight. He’s feeling disoriented from the car crash—‘I probably have a concussion’—and his training in the Marines has made it so that the more stress he feels, the clearer he can think. But it’s his sister bleeding out down there and no one’s pulling over and his cellphone went flying to god knows where when the car rolled—

And suddenly there is a very well-dressed man carrying a bright red nylon duffle bag, effortlessly descending into the culvert, announcing his presence loudly, his accent thick.
“My name is Dr Lecter and I’m going to assist you until the ambulance arrives, understood?”

“My sister is hurt. I’ve made a tourniquet—“ Barney follows him, unable to see the man’s eyes from the brim of his fedora. “The car just came out of no where. I thought there was a shoulder.”

The man kneels down beside his sister, touching her wrist to take a pulse. “Hello, my name is Dr Lecter. Can you tell me your name and what day it is?”

Barney’s sister lies in the ditch of water atop heavy rocks. “Sharon Matthews and it’s Thursday.”

“Very good, Sharon. Squeeze my fingers with your right hand, please.” He place his fingers in hers. “Squeeze my fingers with your left hand, please.” He repeats the exercise then pulls out a penlight. “Follow my finger with your eyes.” He moves a finger in front of her face twice. “You have a concussion,” he concludes, returning the pen light to the bag. “Move your right foot for me, please.”

Sharon does as she’s told and Barney exhales sharply in relief that his sister isn’t paralised.

“Don’t you want me to move my left?” she asks.

“No. You are bleeding profusely from your left leg and I do not want any additional movement to cause you to exsanguinate quicker.” A neck brace is removed from the bag and is carefully fitted around her neck. “You are having trouble breathing. Are there any medications you are taking, Sharon?”

“No.”

“Any drugs or otherwise recreational intoxicants?”

“No. No, I don’t do drugs,” his sister swears.

“Very good to hear.” The doctor pulls out a stethoscope and listens to his sister’s breathing, tapping at her chest gently. “I believe you might have punctured a lung.”

She lets out a whimper. “It hurts to breath.”

“I can alleviate that only temporarily.” The doctor takes out a large compress from his bag, pealing off the wrapper and directs Barney to hold it in place. “I need you to place pressure where my hands are. Can you do that?”

Barney is relieved to have some form of direction amid this crisis. “Yes.”

“You will feel a slight pinch,” the doctor warns as he proceeds to inject something into Sharon’s arm, his hands steady. “Why don’t we converse while we wait? Are you local, Sharon?”

“We just moved here. I’m coming from Florida.” She winces as she inhales. “Am I going to die?”

The man’s voice is confident. “Not if I can help it.”

“You said you’re a doctor?” Barney asks, sick to the core that his sister is hurt because of his driving.

“A surgeon with the Kick Kennedy Memorial Clinic of Baltimore. Specifically an ER surgeon.”

“Guess we got lucky then.” He tries to laugh, but feels no humour.

“So why have you moved so far north? Surely Florida boasts better weather than this,” the doctor
comments as though anyone gives a fuck about the rain.

“My brother got called back to Washington.” Sharon smiles at Barney and he smiles back at her, trying to be strong for her sake.

There is a small voice up by the road. “Daddy?”

The doctor’s head snaps around. “Abigail, I told you to wait in the car.”

Barney looks up to see a young girl dressed in a purple dress holding a large umbrella, looking down at them. “I couldn’t see you. I was worried.”

“I am fine. Please go back to the car,” the doctor calls out.

The girl disappears and Barney finds himself suddenly wondering how anxious she must have been to sit in a car by herself in this weather, not sure what her dad was doing. He looks back at the doctor—it takes a very special type of person to assist others, to give so selflessly in a time of emergency. That’s the kind of man he’d joined the Marines to become—a protector.

“That your little girl?” Sharon asks, smiling.

There is a very fleeting smile on the man’s lips. “Yes.”

“How old is she?”

“Eight.” He takes off the bungee cord that Barney had tied around her thigh to stop the bleeding and pulls out a rubber tourniquet out of his bag. “Please hold still while I retie your tourniquet.”

She cries out as the tourniquet is reapplied and Barney quickly grabs for her hand. Then like a choir of angels, Barney hears sirens.

“The ambulance.”

Sharon is shivering either from the bloodloss or from the cold rain. “How old is your daughter?”

“Eight. Do you remember asking that question already, Sharon?”

“What’s her name?” his sister asks.

“Down here!” Barney shouts.

The doctor’s voice is emotionless. “Abigail.”

Her voice sounds drowsy. “That’s so nice.”

The two EMTs are carrying a spineboard and their own medical bags, one of them calling. “Dr Lecter, what’s the status?”

The doctor recites off a list of suspected injuries, which Barney only half listens to as he watches his sister get strapped to the board and helps carry his sister out of the ravine.

“He is injured as well. He will ride with you.” The doctor indicates for Barney to get into the ambulance with the paramedics and Sharon.

Barney turns one last time to look at the man who’s saved his sister’s life. “Thank you, Dr Lecter.”
The man nods humbly. “My pleasure.”

Barney learns the next day that the man who saved his sister’s life was not just a surgeon, but Maryland’s governor. This favoured son of Baltimore has a reputation that precedes him, larger than life, and Barney buys two copies of the newspaper that talks about them in a front page article before he goes to the hospital to visit Sharon. A few bags of blood and a two hour operation had saved her life and the doctors say she’ll recover just fine.

“Governor Lecter Saves Life,” he reads aloud to his sister as she sips on the apple juice he brought her from the cafeteria. “It says he was on his way with his daughter to Washington DC for her birthday. They were going to the opera.”

His sister hums, smiling at the bouquet of flowers that had been sent by the Lecters. “Little Abigail.”

He starts his first day back at the White House at a desk because of his broken wrist from the accident, but his sister is alive and that’s all that matters to him. President Bush, the man he is supposed to be protecting, makes a few friendly jokes about his cast and signs it, starting them off to a good friendship that remains solid during the president’s remaining six years in office.

*****

Hannibal is in their basement with a particularly rude man strapped to the stainless steel operating table he uses for butchering. Music is playing softly from the small portable stereo system—the speakers could be better, but it’s really for the ambience, not for the analysis of the notes. He’s just slipped on his nitrile gloves when the door opens and a very sleepy nine year old stands on the top step.

“Did you go out without me, Daddy?”

He knows he’s treading on dangerous ground; Abigail has always been allowed to ride along when he’s out for meat, though tonight he’s excluded her for the sake of hunting without a distraction.

“I’m sorry, Abigail. I knew you needed your sleep. If you put on your apron and wash your hands, I will allow you to help me bag this.” He turns back to the man strapped down to the table. “She’s very eager to help, as you can see.”

Abigail smiles. “I’ll hurry.”

Hannibal spends a few extra minutes prepping the room for a second participant, listening to the man struggle on the table. When Abigail returns, she takes the black rubber butcher’s apron he holds out for her and she stands up on the stepstool he’s put out for her on the opposite side of the table.

“Abigail, would you like a lesson on human anatomy?” he asks as he returns to his original position, gloving her hands with the smaller gloves he’d had to order specialty for her.

“Yes, please!” She’s always so eager to learn more about their proclivities, and he’s moving from teaching her just about cooking, but to the science behind the ritual as well.

“You would be surprised how many internal organs the human body can lose before the body shuts down,” he informs her, winking.

“You were very rude. I hope you’ve learned your lesson,” she scolds the man on the table.

“Don’t play with him, Abigail. You need to pay attention. Now tell Daddy how to open him.”
“Here,” she points to the bottom of his abdomen to the top of his ribs, “to here!”

“Very good.” They both relish the sound of screams muffled behind the gag as he cuts the man open. “Let’s start with the spleen.”

Abigail’s staring the man in the eyes curiously. “We need to make more pâté de campagne for my school lunches.”

“I agree. We shall make it after I finish work tomorrow.”

She repeats the names of each body part after him, both in Latin and layman’s terms, and marvels at how each part functions alongside the others, asking questions about what purpose each one serves and then makes suggestions for the recipes they can use. Hannibal is in absolute awe of her, from the care she takes to bag the meat, carefully pressing out the air and wrapping the plastic tightly before taking it over to the vacuum sealer to her quick study of what he’s telling her. The fact she can learn so much without having to read textbooks or sit through lectures is commendable and if he had the opportunity, he’d boast of her skills in their killings publicly. He considers briefly that she could become a surgeon as he had, then tucks the thought away for later.

“Can I cut his liver out?” she finally asks, because the human body can go a considerable amount of time before it shuts down.

“Which one is the liver?” he sneaks a glance at the man, hoping he is paying attention to how smart his daughter is. After all, no one ever gets to see her in this light, instead judging her off the fact she’s memorised the Old Testament and scores well on her spelling tests—this is what separates the geniuses from the common man.

She touches the man’s liver with her gloved fingers, cradling the firm meat. “This one.”

“Were you watching how I made my cuts, Abigail?”

“Yes.”

He is hesitant to hand over the scalpel to her as she has never harvested an organ out of a still living body, but he knows she must do it at some point and there’s no reason it can’t be tonight. “You must be very careful. The blade is very sharp,” he tells her, the last reservations of a worried father.

“I will be,” she promises.

Her technique is comparable to any first year medical student’s at this point, her small and adept fingers carefully holding the knife as she slices through the soft meat and misses the artery that would cause the man to bleed out immediately. Paternal pride is like the roaring of the ocean as it comes to capsize a boat and he turns to look at the man on the table. “Isn’t she clever?”

As he carefully removes the liver, she poises her hand above the small intestine. “Okay! Can I do the next one?”

“Not tonight, Abigail.” He places the liver in a metal basin, allowing it to cool before he’ll bag it. “It’s time for you to go back to bed.”

She hands the scalpel back to him. “But I want to stay and help you.”

“It’s very late and you have school in the morning,” he reminds her.

“Why do you get to hunt and not me?”
It had not been a choice to hurt her, but one of convenience; being a father with a full time job that required so much maintenance occasionally leaves him little option on how to get their food. “I did not exclude you tonight from the hunt because I thought you were undeserving; this was the only opportunity to catch Mr Habe. Now, it is time for you to go to bed. You were allowed to help.”

“She, let me stay,” she begs.

If it was not a school night, he would spend the rest of Habe’s living hours teaching her how to better her anatomy skills. “No, my beloved. It’s time to go back to bed.”

Abigail changes tactics, pouting and crossing her arms. “Carry me.”

“No, but you may stay in my bed tonight.” He is quick to add, “You may not play with the fireplace.”

She makes a face, but only for a moment and he’s proud she’s learning to mask her emotions, a crucial survival technique. “Can I wash my hands in here?”

“Yes, you may.” Hannibal watches her and after a minute, confirms that she is in fact, lingering to look at the man on the table. “Abigail, you are dawdling. It is time for bed.”

“Don’t take too long,” she begs, small and wounded at his distance.

“I will try not to,” he promises.

She stands in the doorway of the basement, looking back at him. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. I love you.”

The magic words to make her smile, to make her lay all her trust at his feet. “I love you, too.”

*****

Hannibal has just walked into the kitchen to start dinner when the door bell chimes; abandoning the apron he had intended to put on, he answers the door to find his campaign manager and chief political advisor standing on the front step looking pale in the face and anxious. It’s two months after Mr Habe and Hannibal has been the governor for little over a year; before he can even invite Jack in, the other man steps inside the house quick and locks the door behind him.

“Hannibal, where’s Abigail?” Jack’s voice is tense and Hannibal feels his hackles rise.

“She’s in my office, working on her homework. Why?”

“Freddie Lounds just wrote this article.”

Jack is holding a copy of the Gotham Tribune, his uncle’s former empire. Hannibal accepts it cautiously, scanning through it until he finds a photo of himself and Abigail on the third page. The regular gossip column titled ‘The Tattler’ has a headline asking, ‘Why Did Governor Lecter Adopt a Killer’s Daughter?’; Hannibal walks slowly to kitchen as he reads the article. He expects an odd conspiracy theory of using the girl as a political tool or perhaps speculation that he is too ’soft’ to lead a government, but instead finds something that causes him wish for Lounds immediate presence so that he could stuff her in his oven and bake her alive.

“She is speculating if I am…” Hannibal can’t find it in himself to say the actual words ‘child molester’ or ‘paedophile’, which is just as well as Jack sees not a violent anger, but a desperation to
prove innocence. He grinds his teeth and his lips are pulled in a thin line.

“You’re taking this better than I expected,” Jack ventures.

“Getting upset over it will not allow me to think and her allegations are not true in the first place,” he counters.

Without hesitation he searches through the rolodex beside the kitchen phone and sifts through until he finds the number for the newspaper he used to own. In short order, as Jack pours them both a whiskey, he is connected to the head of the Tribune, passed along to the top of the management. He wonders how long they’ve been awaiting his call as there’s no reason for the chairman to still be at the office.

“The Gotham Tribune used to have a standard,” he says as calmly as he can manage, thankful that Abigail is not here to hear any of this. The chairman quickly tries to smooth over the matter, explaining that Lounds steps out of bounds on occasion and it’s not always caught before the paper goes to print. But Hannibal has no sympathy for the matter. “I understand she is the editor’s daughter. Abigail is my daughter and Ms Lounds has insinuated that I have hurt her.” He grits his teeth at the response he is given. “No, I would not be happy with her resignation—I would prefer her dismissal.” Not waiting to hear what else is going to be said, he adds, “You will know where to reach me when the decision is made.”

Hanging up the phone, he accepts the whiskey and fixes his gaze on Jack, who still looks grim. Now they will plan.

*****

The following morning, Hannibal keeps his daughter home from school; originally she believes she’s being rewarded for the quick butchering of the man in the basement last night and her assistance in cleaning up afterwards. He’d been unable to spoil their time together with such ugly thoughts and wants to give her one more night of peaceful sleep, so he keeps the reason to himself until they have a quick and early breakfast. He does not want the media outside the house to take pictures of them until this is all cleared and he’s finishing last minute arrangements within the house before Jack Crawford returns. Running the state from his house is not difficult and Abel Gideon has been voicing his outrage at the situation from the Governor’s office, which seems to be creating the desired effect of rallying the public behind him. Bedelia herself is on the morning news, firmly stating that Lounds is merely trying to ride the Verger story a little bit longer and that it’s “shameful, sinful, and we will be filing a lawsuit against her for defamation of character.” She’d already called at two in the morning, angry and promising to have the matter cleared quickly and publicly to save face for all of them.

Hannibal finally breaks the news to his daughter as he follows her into her bedroom with an oil painting from the attic. “Abigail, there are people coming to the house today. They will be asking you questions.”

She looks frantically to the Odalisque that is being removed from the wall to be stored away. “Why?”

He hangs a pastoral countryside in the blank space, finding the sheep somewhat droll after the Odalisque’s disproportionate nudity. “Someone wrote something very naughty about us—no, not about what we eat. She lied and made up a story that I hurt you.”

Abigail frowns. “You never hurt me.”
“I know. But the people coming today will ask you if I have.” He straightens the frame and motions for her to follow him with the Odalisque print.

She walks at his side, her fingers unable to stay off the frame of her beloved ‘Princess’. “So I tell them that you don’t hurt me?”

“You must be subtle. If you tell them that directly, they will think I am making you lie to them,” he explains.

“What questions will they ask?”

“They will want to know if you ever sleep in a bed with me. You must tell them no.”

Her brow furrows. “Okay.”

“They will ask if I’ve ever seen you naked. You must tell them no.” She nods and he braces himself for what he has to say next. “They will ask if you’ve ever seen me naked.”

Her eyes get wide and she fervently shakes her head. “I haven’t.”

“I know.” Were the circumstances much different, he would find her reaction amusing. “They will want to know if I’ve ever touched you in a way that makes you uncomfortable.”

“What did the story about us say? What did she write?” her voice is higher, terrified.

“Something very horrible.”

“Did she say that you tried to kill me?”

“No. Something worse.”

Her young mind can’t comprehend what could possibly exist between them beyond love and death. “You’ve never touched me in a way that makes me uncomfortable.”

“If they ask if I’ve kissed you, you must tell them no.”

She comes to stand on the stairs in front of him, blocking his path. “Who wrote about us? I hate them.”

He leans the frame of the painting against the landing and places his hands on her shoulders. “Do you understand all the things I am telling you, Abigail?”

“What will they be asking you?”

“They will be asking me the same questions.” He will have no problem answering such disgusting questions, but she is another matter as he will not be present to give her direction. “But do you understand what I’m asking you?”

“Yes,” she promises. “Who wrote about us?”

“A woman named Freddie Lounds.”

While Abigail has no idea whom Freddie Lounds is, her pretty face contorts into an angry snarl. “I want to roast her on a split alive like the pig she is.”

“She will get her due punishments,” he assures her, but his daughter is not so easily placated.
“We’ll kill her.”

“Yes,” he promises. His hands rub her upper arms to comfort. “Do you remember what I told you, Abigail?”

“Every word,” she swears to him.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Daddy.” She holds his face between her hands, needing him to understand that no matter what was said, she loves him. Anyone who tries to come between them will have to go through her, the honey in the lion. Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet.

Freddie Lounds has a front page apology article on the Gotham Tribune the following evening, as well as the small side note that mentioned the Gotham Tribune had subsequently fired her for the story. His reputation is quickly regained with plenty of people assuring him that they never believed the story in the first place. Within two weeks the matter is officially cleared and everyone has moved onto the new bombings in Madrid by terrorists; they wait another three months before leaving the house to eat anyone and to help her feel a sense of control, he allows Abigail the opportunity to use the stun gun to incapacitate a woman who had been ambulance chasing at the clinic. When they get the woman back to house, Abigail sneers and berates her, using the stun gun over and over until Hannibal has to pull her away and warn her about ruining the meat.

Emotionally they are both still shaken about the article and they are careful to maintain normal facades, though at home it’s driven their dependency on one another deeper; they only have one another to rely on in this world anymore. They are so very alone.

*****

Hannibal is taking breakfast in the expansive dining room at the head of the table. Abigail is sitting in his lap, feeding him an english muffin as she looks over the William Sonoma catalogue she wants him to order her Christmas presents from. Very rarely do they engage in something so domestic, but they have an audience and are expected to perform their roles of Loving Father and Charming Daughter. He and his elder cousins Patrick Joseph Kennedy II and Kathleen Hartington Kennedy are discussing his plan for healthcare in Maryland, politely listening to their hopes for more focus on mental health care. Midway through his assurance that he takes mental health care very serious, his cellphone blips softly beside his coffee cup. It’s Jack.

“I need to take this call, Abigail,” he says, gently trying to convince his daughter to stand.

“Do it here,” she begs, obviously not wanting to leave the comfort of his lap.

“It’s not polite,” he insists.

Cousin Caroline, who sits to his left, smiles teasingly at him. “No one minds, Hannibal.”

Bedelia, who is cracking the shell to a soft boiled egg, knows immediately who it is. “Just tell Jack that you’re busy and hang up.”

Knowing that he will cause more friction simply by following his manners, he answers the phone. “Good morning, Jack.”

Jack rudely offers no greeting. “Hannibal, I need to talk to you.”
“I am quite busy, Jack.”

Jack’s voice holds no humour. “It’s something of an emergency.”

Abigail shifts off his lap, looking worried as he stands up and excuses himself, accepting the catalogue his daughter presses into his hands. He steps into the empty pantry room, turning on the light and shutting the door behind him; not exactly an office, but possibly the only private area he’ll be able to find without returning to Lady Murasaki’s property and taking more time away from his breakfast.

Alone in the pantry, he gives his campaign manager permission to speak. “Yes, Jack?”

“How were they killed?” Hannibal asks.

“Shot his father-in-law in the face at the table, then the mother-in-law, then got his wife before she could get out of the dining room.”

Hannibal turns the pages of the catalogue and finds a circled double boiler, copper and pricey—he almost smiles at how similar their taste in kitchenware is. “I am assuming this means I need to return to Maryland.”

“Yeah. It’s pretty chaotic here.” Jack sounds tired.

“Very well. I shall pack my bags now. Thank you for the call, Jack. I hope your holidays are going considerably better.”

Jack gives a humourless laugh. “See you soon, Hannibal.”

Hannibal leaves the pantry with the catalogue and phone, preparing himself for the rest of the day. Standing in the doorway of the dining room, he gives a careful smile to his daughter.

“Abigail, would you please come here?”

She hurries over and in the hallway asks, “Yes, Daddy?”

“Something has happened with Mr Gideon—“
“Uncle Abel?”

“Do not interrupt, Abigail.”

“I’m sorry.”

He affectionately strokes the side of her head to acknowledge how good she’s becoming with her manners. “You and I must return to Maryland. I know you were having fun here, but the state needs me.”

She almost glances back to the table of adopted family, but seems to remember that he’s the most important person and she nods her head. “I understand.”

He smiles at her, a reward. “I am fortunate to have family like you.”

She beams at the words and runs to get her coat and scarf so she can return to their holiday property. “I’ll go pack!”

Hannibal returns to the dining room, everyone turning to look at him with interest. He is quick to feign disappointment. “I’m afraid I must return to Maryland.”

One cousin cries out, “What? No!”

“Everything okay?” yet another asks, face drawn in concern.

Bedelia sits quietly—they know one another well enough that something has happened and he’ll call her about it later.

“Something has come up that requires my immediate attention,” he says simply and courteously adds, “Abigail and I shall hopefully see you in December for the holidays.”

He has no real intention to return for Christmas.

Hannibal makes his cordial goodbyes and packs his suitcases as well as Abigail’s, then calls to arrange an escort into Maryland with the state troopers. The news organisations are a nightmare as he expected they would be and he finds a very persistent crowd gathered around his house; Abigail wants to wave to the cameras, but he tells her ‘no’ and she very dutifully pretends she doesn’t see them as they drive into the garage. She wants to know what happened, but Jack shoos her away and Hannibal gives her permission to put on her art history DVDs to watch in the living room while he and Jack convene in his home office. She hides in his bedroom closet when the state troopers arrive to talk to him and he smiles when he finds her polishing his dress shoes.

Lunch is a tense affair as Abigail keeps looking to him for answers, but instead allows ‘Uncle Jack’ to keep her distracted by topics that aren’t regarding ‘Uncle Abel’. Finally the day draws to an end and she begs him to tell her what happened before he can tell her to wash up for dinner. He tells her everything, wondering how upset she’ll be over Gideon’s egotistical outburst, but as the story progresses, her expression goes from shocked worry to shocked amusement.

“What’s so funny, my princess?” he finally asks, wondering what is happening in her sweet young mind.

She smiles impishly. “He did it because of me.”

Caught momentarily off-guard, his face slips slightly to reveal his shock. “You did what?”
“I told him he shouldn’t stay with people who weren’t really his family,” she explains.

“Did you tell him to kill?” He is unable to keep his voice from rising slightly, suddenly reeling with the possibility that she might, yet again, have made herself the target of investigation.

“No!” she bursts out laughing. “I just told him that he shouldn’t have to spend time with people who weren’t his family.”

He exhales slowly then kneels in front of her, taking hold of her shoulders gently. “You have a very special gift to bring out the worst in people, Abigail. You must be careful.”

Her smile fades immediately and she swallows hard. “Like Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

“Like Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” he repeats with a nod.

Hobbs is the one name that can instantly sober a situation in his favour and as expected, she seems to be considering what he’s saying, her expression grave. “He killed all those people because of me. And my mom.”

“Yes.”

“Why does killing feel so good, then?” Her innocence makes him feel like a father, explaining the nature of the universe to someone who will one day usurp his role.

“Killing feels good only if you are killing those who must be judged for their actions. Killing the innocent has no honour,” he explains.

“Was his family innocent?”

“I don’t know. See what has happened? People have died without being properly judged and they were not honoured.”

She understands that when they eat, it is because others were found unworthy to walk among them; while he views it more akin to pest control, she has taken to thinking of many deaths as mercy killings, putting people out of their miserably stupid and gauche existences. She’s still too young to do anything but riding along during the collection of their next meal and he’s been carefully introducing her to butchering in their basement. And he sometimes gifts her with the opportunity to flip through their kitchen’s rolodex to make the selection of who will be brought to their table and freezer. But she’s been yet to take a life of her own and while he can understand her glee for being responsible of something of that magnitude, she must be careful and it won’t hurt to have her feel some shame over it.

She shifts uncomfortably at his side. “I didn’t mean to do anything this bad.”

“It was a mistake, Abigail. Perhaps we should work on your ability before you play again.”

“I’m sorry.” Her fingers reach up to touch the golden cross Bedelia had given to her at Easter. “Do I need to tell this at confession?”

Hannibal chuckles. “No.”

Abigail looks relieved. “Good.”

“Why don’t we get ready for bed?” he suggests. “I have a very long day ahead of me tomorrow.”

As he watches his daughter walk down the hallways towards her bedroom, he is struck by an off
thought. What if Abigail truly did inspire Abel Gideon into killing his family? It’s almost absurd, and yet he can’t help but think about how greatly she can influence him with a simple look or the right words. He frowns slightly, trying to see the secret that rests within her, this ability that is perhaps better than his own gift of persuasion. Is it intentional? Is she unaware that she can wield power over strong individuals and absolutely corrode the ones that are weak? And if she is aware of what she does, how subtle has she been?

His stomach sours and his frown deepens; she’s had unlimited access to his inner workings, unlimited time to accomplish anything she wants. While he doesn’t believe she’s actually cunning enough to manipulate him at all, she has certainly influenced great tracts of their relationship. His own shaping of their family is, of course, grand architecture at its finest, but she has been the one picking the shades and tones of their life.

He returns his face to a neutral expression and then he smiles, a strange mix of fatherly pride and deep relief that no matter the outcome, she is worthy of being his daughter, worthy of being the one he nurtures to not only be his equal, but one day his better.

Perhaps it is time she joins him.

*****///*****

She is ten and it’s 2005. Normally exuberant after a day at school, he is surprised and worried when she sits almost silently in the front seat beside him. He attempts to coax simple conversation and when her tone stays despondent rather than angry, he is relieved that he is not the cause for her sudden taciturn nature. Once they are inside the privacy of their house, he decides to find out what exactly it is that’s upsetting her.

“Abigail, what’s wrong?” he asks as she takes off her uniform jacket and hangs it up by the front door.

She shakes her head, trying to walk back to her bedroom. “Nothing.”

He grabs her by the shoulder ever so gently and halts her from leaving his presence. “Abigail, what’s wrong?”

She swallows hard and turns towards him, though her eyes don’t meet his. “Some kids at school…”

His heart rate changes, one beat quicker. Millions of years of evolution affect even him when he hears his heir has been wronged, primal instinct overwhelming the realisation that being angry at children is foolish.

“What did they do?”

A child so accustomed to holding her head high, she lowers it in shame. “They called me a cannibal. Because of… him.”

Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

He nods. “Start from the beginning.”

“Mrs Fielding was talking about the Donner Party and how the people had to eat the bodies to survive and Mrs Fielding said cannibalism was rare and Tom said ‘no, it’s not’. And then he turned around and looked at me and said, ‘Abigail’s real dad was a cannibal’. And for a second I thought he meant you, but then I realised he were talking about Garrett Jacob Hobbs.” She whispers the last part, and her cheeks burn with shame. “And then everyone in the class looked at me and Jacey asked
if it was true and Tom kept saying how his dad had told him about how Garrett Jacob Hobbs had
tried to kill me in the clinic and that he’d tried to cut my throat and that’s why I was allowed to wear
a scarf around my neck and that he used to kill people and eat them and feed them to us and he called
me a monster!”

She bursts into tears, hiding her face behind her hands. Hannibal feels a cold fury, the entirety of the
Arctic Circle’s ice residing in his veins; he wants to find this child who has hurt his Abigail and
savage him with his teeth alone, chewing off his face and tearing out his throat while he’s still alive.

“You are not a monster. You are a victim,” he insists, clinging to Abigail possessively as she sobs.

“What are you?” she asks in a broken voice.

“Your father. Your brother.” She needs to feel as though she has not only a protector, but an ally.

“Are you a monster?”

“I am whatever you need me to be, Abigail.” To this he swears to be true.

“Please don’t let me be a victim anymore.” She sniffs loudly.

“You will never be a victim again. I promise this on my life.” He smiles. “And you’re not a monster.
You are beautiful.”

“Does it bother you that we eat people?” she whispers.

“No. I would never change that,” he murmurs.

He can feel her body ease against his and her head rests easier on his shoulder. “Me, neither.”

He kisses her temple, rubbing her back. “Let’s dry your tears and discuss what we are to do with
your very rude classmate.”

*****

Abigail smiles as she watches her father carefully paint her toenails. He’s picked out a delicate pink
colour, even though she wanted red—a compromise—and she holds very still so nothing smudges.

“He doesn’t have to participate in PE this month. So he just gets into the PE uniform and then sits in
the bleachers working on his homework.” They’re talking about Tom Faraday, the boy who called
her ‘cannibal’ as though it was a slur, and she’s dutifully reciting all the information she’s gathered
on him in the past two weeks.

“What are his weaknesses?” her father asks her as he shakes the nail polish bottle, the small metal
ball inside mixing up the lacquer before he continues painting.

“He’s allergic to bees!”

“So we shall cause him to have allergic reaction.”

She frowns. “He carries around a epi pen.”

He smiles at her, the roguish smile that makes him look like a prince, like an older brother.

“A problem that is easy to get around. He will most likely leave it behind in the locker room, so you
shall discharge the contents of pen and then place it back where you found it—he will look like a
foolish little boy who forgot to bring his medication with him.” He looks thoughtful for a moment and she itches to wiggle her toes in his hand, but doesn’t. “We will put a bee in his uniform shoes. It will most likely stay in that dark location and when he slips his foot in, the bee will have no other response but than to sting him. As he will get dressed while the others are in the shower, he will have no assistance once he realises his pen is empty. Five minutes without oxygen is all that's needed,” he assures her.

“Will he suffer?”

“Yes. And it will be embarrassing.” Her father blows delicately on her toes to dry the nail polish.

Abigail has been practicing her smile, which can only be described as wicked. “Good.”

*****

She’s pretended to have an upset stomach and her PE teacher allows her to change back into her school uniform, instructing her to go to the nurses’ office immediately afterwards; knowing she has a limited amount of time, she hurries into the boys locker room and pulls out the small plastic sandwich bag she’s carried with her to school. Her father warned her how important it was that she not get caught, warning her that she might not be able to explain what she’d been doing and he certainly wouldn’t be able to make any excuses for her. He made her recite the instructions for the plan over and over and her body moves almost mindlessly to the unison of her father’s voice and her own, repeating the plan in her mind.

The lockers are all open, no locks of any kind on them and Abigail finds Tom Faraday’s in little time. First she finds his epi pen and stab it into the wine cork she’s brought along, pumping out all the fluid as quickly as she can. Checking that it’s truly empty, she wipes it down with the alcohol wipe she’s also brought along, replacing it without leaving her fingerprints. Next she pulls out the small plastic bottle that holds the bee her father had caught for her out in their small garden; opening the lid carefully so as not to startle the insect and lose it, she carefully taps the bee into the bottom of the dress shoe Tom will have to change back into at the end of the hour.

"Sorry. Please stay in there." She feels guilty that this little bee is going to have to die all because of Tom. “You’re going to be serving a higher purpose. I'll honour you."

She wipes the shoe down with her alcohol wipe and replaces it, then wipes down the locker handle to remove anymore prints. Placing the little wipe into the sandwich bag she’d brought along with her, she sprints out of the boys locker room and then walks calmly down the hallways to the nurses’ office, smiling.

*****

Two days later, Abigail presents her finished homework on Hannibal’s desk for him to correct, curtseying. He smiles to her and leans back in his chair slightly, setting down the state budget analysis.

“Abigail, I thought I might bake you a cake tonight.”

Her eyes go wide. “Cake? Why?”

"They took him off life support this afternoon." He doesn’t have to specify who.

She blinks. “So…he’s dead?”

“Yes.”
A large and very pleased smile crosses her lips. “Thank you for helping me.”

“Of course, my love.” He has been longing dessert all day, proud of what his daughter has achieved, however small and despite his own help in the matter. “Now would you like chocolate or raspberry?”

****

Abigail’s eleven when she realises her father is making up the business trips during her birthday that prevent her from having a party; anytime he has to attend to gubernatorial duties outside of the state, he always allows her to tag along, which is why she hadn’t caught on right away. She’s angry with him, but more so disappointed and after spending a few hours alone in the hotel bathroom crying and pulling out strands of hair from the nape of her neck, where the skin is sensitive and won’t be seen by him later on, she decides she’ll be cold with him. Her father has been re-elected in the 2006 Maryland gubernatorial race and she’s very proud of him, even more excited when calls up their private plane to fly them to Quebec for ‘pressing matters’.

They sit in his hotel room at the table beside the wall length windows, eating an exquisitely catered dinner as they overlook the inky black ocean outside Quebec City. He’s brought along a homemade birthday cake and all her presents which wait neatly on his bed to be unwrapped.

Her anger gnaws at her.

“If you don’t want me to have a party, just say it.” She doesn’t look away from the ocean.

“I do want you to have a party. I merely don’t want to participate in it,” he explains, not even trying to deny it.

“Then we could let Aunt Bee host it. You know how much she likes parties.” He is silent and she sighs, squishing her fork tines in the small scoop of caviar on her plate. “But you wouldn’t be in charge, so you still don’t want it.” He still says nothing and she knows he’s watching her, which feels like he’s mocking her. “You’re not supposed to lie to me. You could have just told me.”

“Allow me to make it up to you.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” she mumbles, picking at the foie gras that doesn’t even taste good because it’s made from goose.

But he will never truly take no for an answer and he leaves his seat, coming around to her side of the table, kneeling before her and taking her hand between his. “Abigail, I’ve hurt you. Allow me to make it up to you.”

“‘Kay,” she says dejectedly. “Yes, okay.” His hands don’t leave hers and she remembers to add a grateful, “Thank you.”

His smile broadens, pleased at her absolute surrender. “I shall plan something special just for the two of us to enjoy.”

She nods, only to appease him. “Okay. Thank you.”

In the end, he takes her on a weeklong trip through South America and they pretend they’ve fled the US, hiding from law enforcement for their crimes. It’s fun to have this new game with him and he calls her Mischa the entire time, his hand firm around hers as he whispers, ‘Little sister’. She forgives him for his lies and they return to their easy love for one another, which is a relief to her because they are fated to be family and she can’t imagine hating him. She never asks for a birthday party again and
every year he goes out of his way to impress her with his thoughtfulness.

*****

Hannibal stands in the doorway of his darkened office, looking at the interesting scene before him. On the rug before his desk is a half dressed body and standing over it was Tobias Budge. Budge had worked as a page under Bedelia (and no doubt on top of her as well) and when he’d returned from Washington, he’d swept the mayoral race to become mayor of Colombia, the state’s second largest city after Baltimore, and after a successful and popular term as mayor, Bedelia had recommended he take Gideon’s place as Lieutenant Governor.

The air in the office smells thick of fear and lingering odour of sex…and fighting.

While Budge has many similarities to Hannibal, he is keenly aware that he should never trust nor turn his back to the younger man. And now it seems he has evidence to back up that instinct. Budge’s eyes are eerie and unblinking, the look of a killer who is evaluating Hannibal’s worth. While Hannibal is certain he could fight Budge and win, Abigail is waiting downstairs in the car and he doesn’t want to come to any harm, lest Budge go after her next.

Keeping his face indifferent, he finally makes eye contact with the other man. “You’ve killed him. It wasn’t an accident.” He keeps emotion out of his voice, despite his curiosity at what has happened.

“No,” Budge agrees, his tone equally careful as he searches Hannibal for any sign for what he’ll do next.

Hannibal takes a step forward, looking down at the body. It’s calculated, a demonstration that he feels no fear of the younger man. “Do you want help hiding this mess?”

Budge visibly relaxed and nodded once. “It would be beneficial to both of us.”

Hannibal comes over to the body and recognises the face. “The second chair violinist from the orchestra.”

Budge shrugs, his tone almost proud. “It was for the best really. They’ll have to replace him now.”

Hannibal makes a noise of agreement.

“Shall we take him to the furnace?”

The question is a test—Budge no doubt wants to see how practical a man Hannibal is, if he’s comfortable not just hiding, but destroying. “That would be the safest decision I believe.”

The violinist is a very tall man and far too heavy to be carried by one man alone, so they work together to hoist the body out of the office. There is a violinist’s bow lying on the ground and Budge grabs it; Hannibal wonders if the man had been ‘performing’ for Budge using some kink, as there’s no violin about. He frowns, reminded that they’d been having sex in his office and that flairs an anger in Hannibal—it stinks of arrogance and overstepping major recognition of the other man’s place in his government. But he pretends that he overlooks these things. He’ll make plans for Budge when it’s convenient for him—he doesn’t need Bedelia breathing down his neck because the state’s second in command is ‘missing’. Tobias seems to be waiting for Hannibal to say something more, but Hannibal ignores him as they carry the body to the basement of the building and throw it into the ever running furnace. And when they return to the office, Hannibal retrieves the documents he’d originally come for from a locked file cabinet; they part with polite ‘good evenings’. He returns to the still running Bentley down on the street; Abigail looks relieved to see him as he walks around the front of the car and seeing no oncoming traffic, hurries to the driver’s side and climbs into the
Bentley. He hands the files over to his daughter and buckling his seatbelt, pulls off the curb.

“What took you so long?” Abigail demands, reaching out to touch his arm; he finds her worry justifiable tonight and luxuriates in the physical contact meant to remind him that on occasion he answers to her.

“Tobias was in my office. He had a body with him.”

She stares at him, waiting for a punchline and when none comes, she asks, “He killed someone?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I believe he found pleasure in it.” Hannibal leaves out what that possible pleasure might have been.

“Oh.” She frowns and she bites the inside of her cheek. “Did you kill him?”

“No.”

Her eyebrows raise. “You helped him cover it up?”

“What other choice did I have?”

Neither of them consider the idea that the police should have been notified.

“Where’s the body?” she inquires next.

“We were able to place it in the furnace downstairs. It will be completely incinerated by morning bar any malfunction in the machine.” They reach a red light and in their mellifluous Lithuanian, he tells her, “Sweet sister, I would prefer you to keep your distance from my lieutenant governor.”

She nods in compliance, but he can see the burning curiosity in her eyes. “Do you think he might try to hurt us?”

“There is a possibility.”

“Should we tell Aunt Bee?”

“No.” Not wishing for her to fret about the matter any longer he gives her a gentle pat on the knee. “We need to get our passenger home, don’t we?”

She smiles and glances to the backseat, as though she can see the man they’re transporting in the trunk. And while the rest of their night goes off without a hitch (Abigail plays ‘Hip to Be Square’ by Huey Lewis and the Newsboys for them to dance to in their plastic coveralls as they wait for their pig to wake up), Hannibal can’t help but allow his brain compute what has happened with Budge.

He never allows himself to alone with the other man the remainder of his time in office.

*****

Abigail stands patiently by a column in the grand room all the patrons on the concert have convened in; the scar on her neck is hidden behind the high neckline of her dress, something elegant and sculpted from Paris, shimmering with small hand-sewn sequins and cut from crimson the colour of blood, the sleeves covering the scratch marks on her wrists—the woman she’d helped butcher with her father two nights before had been a little feisty. Her father’s Lieutenant Governor, Tobias Budge,
stands awkwardly next to her, watching the very animated Franklyn talk to her about Michael Jackson’s ‘Thriller’ and the iconic red leather jacket. Abigail is nodding politely, sipping at the Shirley Temple in her cocktail glass as she listens to him speaking. Budge occasionally watches her face as though he’s confused whether or not she’s feigning her interest in his aide’s dreadful story. Finally her father approaches them and quickly all focus turns to him.

“Tobias, how are you this evening?’ he asks as he stands across from her.

“Well. The delightful Abigail was keeping us entertained, though Franklyn took our conversation hostage rather quickly.” Lieutenant Governor Budge doesn’t even pretend to like his personal assistant.

Her father turns to Franklyn and gives a patronising smile. “Franklyn, did you enjoy the concert?”

Franklyn has the most adoring eyes. “I did, I did, Governor Lecter. I hope you did as well?”

“I did.”

Lieutenant Governor Budge steps forward slightly, apparently wanting to take the attention away from Franklyn. “Abigail was discussing the subtleties of Modest Mussorgsky’s work. Franklyn was discussing Michael Jackson.”

“Were you drawing parallels, Franklyn?” her father asks curiously.

“Yes, well no. Partially. No. Maybe.”

Abigail quirks her lips slightly when her father’s eyes meet hers, trying not to laugh at the awkwardness of Franklyn’s conversation.

“Hannibal, there you are.” A socialite that often attends the same functions as them approaches their group and they all acknowledge her politely.

Her father nods his head slightly. “Good evening.”

The woman touches Abigail’s elbow, her eyes warm. It’s Mrs Komeda, a novelist from Boston that they see frequently in their social circles. “Hello, Abigail. You look stunning tonight. It seems we both have good taste when it comes to dresses.” She chuckles, touching the low neckline of her own red dress.

“I can’t take all the credit. My dad picked it out for me,” Abigail admits, proud that as his reflection, people find her beautiful.

Hand still on her elbow, Mrs Komeda prompts, “Abigail, when are you going to convince your father to have a dinner party for us? I’m hungry.” The socialite glances over at her father. “It’s been too long since you’ve properly cooked for us, Hannibal.”

“Come over and I will cook for you,” her father offers.

“I said properly, means dinner and the show. Have you seen him cook? It’s an entire performance.” She pouts. “He used to throw such exquisite dinner parties. You heard me, used to.”

Abigail is curious why her father allows this woman to taunt him, why he looks amused and not annoyed.

“And I will again once inspiration strikes. I cannot force a feast, a feast must present itself.”
“It’s a dinner party, not a unicorn, Hannibal,” the novelist scoffs and her father smiles.

“Oh, but the feast is life. You put the life in your belly, and you live.”

It’s then that Abigail looks at him slyly. “So we should find a way to lure ourselves a unicorn.”

The Chesapeake Ripper kills ten people over a two week time period, sending the FBI and Maryland State Troopers into an absolute tailspin trying to figure out what would cause such a killing spree, and the Lecters host their greatest dinner party to date. Mrs Komeda is thrilled.

*****

Will is in the GWU cafeteria, eating a bologna sandwich he brought from home, drinking a bottle of apple juice he bought out of one of the campus’ many vending machines. It is 2011 and he is thirty-six. He’s hunched over his work, trying to spot links from the Reagan campaign that reflected later on in his career, Alzheimer's disease aside. Occasionally students approach him, ones who’d like to ask about a lecture or upcoming assignment, but for the most part he’s left alone and that’s what he prefers. So he doesn’t look up when someone comes to stand by his table. He won’t give them attention unless provoked.

“Will Graham, I’m Jack Crawford—“

Will recognises the name immediately; he’s been waiting years for him to show up and doesn’t hesitate to spit out, “I don’t do that anymore.”

Crawford’s scowl is apparent in his tone. “You don’t even know who I’m representing.”

“I don’t care. I don’t do elections anymore.”

Crawford huffs and hands over a thick folio, opening it to the front page. “This is Hannibal Lecter.”

Will refuses to look down at the 8x11” photograph. “Three time governor of Maryland. I already know who he is. If you’re coming to me now, it means he wants to run for president as he just got reelected to governorship.”

Crawford nods. “The Democrats want him to be the front runner with Bedelia Du Maurier.”

“Why not Clinton? They wanted her in ’08.”

Crawford has a quick answer. “Classified.”

Will frowns and lowers his voice in respect. “Is it fatal?”

The other man is quick to shake his head. “No, but she doesn’t want it to become public.”

“So Lecter and Du Maurier are their silver medal,” Will says, gauging the other man’s reaction. Crawford won’t concede to this. “Their gold medal. They're both winners.”

“Then they can do this without me.”

“You haven’t worked on anyone’s election committee since 2001. After Verger got arrested.”

Will bristles at the name, nausea coiling in the pit of his empty stomach. It’s a burden he’s been carrying for almost ten years and it’s not getting any lighter.
“You’re upset you got him elected in ’98.” Crawford is a fool for thinking simple words can comfort him. “Look, everyone fucked up when it came to Verger. This doesn’t fall only on you.”

“I should have seen it. I become these men in order to help them win. I became him but I didn’t see.” Will busies himself with the coursework he’d been lecturing on. “I’m not taking this risk again.”

“Just—just look it over, Graham.” The campaign manager suddenly sounds desperate. “I’m backing him. Bedelia and Ted feel he is the best—“

“Of course they want him in the White House. He’s their family.”

Crawford is not easily deterred. “Hannibal—he’s like no one else I’ve ever met. He’s the perfect politician.”

“That’s an oxymoron—“

Crawford laughs. “No! No, Hannibal is—“

“You sound like you’re in a religious fervor,” Will scolds; it’s fine to promote your camp, but you’re supposed to remain objective—that’s Politics 101.

“You’ve seen everything he’s accomplished, Will. I know you’ve followed his career. I know you have curriculum based on his governorship—“

Will’s embarrassed to be called out. “That’s—that’s different.”

Crawford’s voice is firm. “Hannibal Lecter is a man who could change the world if given the chance.”

Will wants to make a joke about Jonestown economics, but decides it’s a rather cheap thing to say. Lecter’s campaign manager takes the opportunity to invite Will once more.

“Just read it over and come to the speech.” There’s a flyer tucked into the front pocket of the folio. “I’m not doing this anymore,” Will protests.

“Just come see him. I won’t even tell him you’re coming. No strings attached,” Crawford promises.

Will hates it when people won’t take no for an answer. “I’m not going to commit myself to anything.”

“That’s fine, that’s fine.” Crawford grins at him. “But I promise you’ll change your mind when you hear him.”

*****

Will shows up to the speech anyway, lingering in the back where he can’t be spotted, but of course Jack Crawford finds him.

“I’m not meeting with him. I just came to watch,” Will says firmly, because he is very interested in Hannibal Lecter, no matter what he says.

“Sure, sure,” Crawford agrees as though he believes him.

They listen to Lecter talk to the crowd, inciting cheers and laughs in all the right places in his soft spoken oration. Will’s radar isn’t picking up anything as he watches and he shifts uncomfortably,
because that’s simply not possible.

“What’s he like outside of the spotlight?” he asks lowly.

Crawford nods his head at the politician at the front of the room. “This is Hannibal 24/7.”

Will grits his jaw. “Jack.”

Crawford holds his hand up as though he’s taking an oath. “I swear on my life, Will. This is Hannibal all the time.”

Will’s suspicious. “No one’s like this all the time.”

“No one’s like Hannibal.” Crawford gives him a strange smile.

“What’s the catch?”

“Accent. Wealthy. Expensive clothes. No girlfriend or wife. No—“

Will has the start of a headache and doesn’t want to hear this bullshit. “No, what’s the catch?”

Jack leans in and says very earnestly, “Will, I told you—he’s the perfect politician. What you see is what you get. Anything bad you could say about him is all small potatoes.”

“What else? What’s…his daughter like?” Will can’t bear the thought of spinning a brat—her biological dad tried to slit her throat when she was five, can you imagine all the blood—into someone wholesome. He hates politicians’ kids the most.

Crawford leans back against the wall. “The best. Abigail is great. She’s just great.”

“This is all too good to be true.”

The campaign manager perks up. “Do you want to meet him?”

“Not really,” Will says curtly. “You said this is who the Party wants?”

“Before Ted died, he began setting everything up.”

That seems promising, but Will doesn’t let on. “He was mad about McCain and Chilton.”

“Who isn’t?” Crawford grumbles. “We can’t run Obama again, which is a shame. But Hannibal shares many of the same views as he did, so we know that he’ll be popular with the Dem voters.”

“He’s still going to get the same birtherism shit because he’s got an accent,” Will points out as he listens to the Governor’s voice carry through the room.

Jack doesn’t seem bothered by this. “Schwarzenegger got elected and Hannibal was three times. I don’t think it will be as big a hurdle.”

“Schwarzenegger is an actor and people are overly fond of celebrities,” Will snips, but as he listens longer, he considers that perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad. He shifts his balance for a moment, weighing the options. “I…I think he could win if we start steering this ship now.”

Jack looks genuinely surprised. “You want in?”

Will isn’t particularly interested what the rest of the Democrats have to offer this time. “It’s either him
or Chilton for another four years.”

“God,” Crawford groans.

“I…I’m not going to be social.” Will wants that understood.

Jack nods and his look is sincere. “I’ll set something up for you.”

“And look like a high maintenance asshole?” Sometimes Will just can’t keep his mouth shut.

“I’ll tell them you need a quiet space for your work. They’ll understand.”

Will takes this as his opportunity to leave. “Get a contract sent over.”

Jack gets a grin on his face. “You’re gonna love him, Will.”

“I’m not meeting him, Jack,” he calls back over his shoulder.

*****

Bedelia sits beside her cousin on a leather couch at the Crawford’s house; they’re in the couple’s living room and she has a tumblr of whiskey in one hand that she won’t be drinking. Hannibal exchanges a look with her, both much more comfortable in a house not outfitted by Pier One and Pottery Barn. Jack and Bella return with a tray of chocolate truffles from a bakery, setting them on the low table between the couch and two armchairs they both take. Bedelia wonders for a moment if there are marital problems between them. Wouldn’t that be fun?

“So I’ve got the best of the best,” Jack announces as he grins.

Bedelia feels her heart skip a beat. “Will Graham.”

Bella looks at her husband in surprise. “Will Graham? I’d heard he retired.”

“Quit.” Jack grabs a truffle off the table. “He’s not going to be cheap and he’s—“

Bedelia waves her freehand. “Anything he wants.”

Jack looks hesitant for a moment. “He’s…well, it’s nothing we can’t get him. Not really anything special.”

Bedelia settles back on the couch somewhat. “We’re going to win.”

Hannibal has been watching them in silence. “I will admit I’m not terribly familiar with his work.”

“He was the one hired to make Verger a governor.”

Hannibal studies her. “You were the one who paid for him?”

She’s quick to deflect any blame. “Verger did. I merely suggested the name.”

“Have you followed his career?” he asks and she’s suddenly uncomfortable with his stare; he has never liked when she keeps information to herself.

“I have,” she says carefully. “Bella brought him to my attention in the first place.”

Bella smiles serenely. “Will Graham is truly a wunderkind. His methodology is unique.”
“How so?” Hannibal asks.

“He claims to become his candidates.” Bella seems amused at this.

“Become them?”

She nods. “He studies his candidates and…empathises with them.”

Hannibal actually leans forward. “He became Mason Verger?”

Jack shakes his head, however. “Verger kept him in an office while he was on the road. They never interacted. He says he became the image that Verger was projecting.” Jack adds, “And I would suggest not bringing that up to him.”

“A sore subject, no doubt.” Hannibal rests his tumbler on his knee. “So when can we meet him?”

*****

Hannibal receives his Secret Service detail in July 2011, the week after he’s announced as a top contender; there is worry that he’s a particularly easy target because he’s ‘exotic’ and a member of the Kennedy dynasty. Jack personally introduces the youngest agent to him.

“How about you meet Agent Miriam Lass.”

“Hello, Agent Lass,” he greets her.

Her face is carefully composed, a mask of professionally, though her eyes are still young. “It’s nice to meet you, Governor Lecter.”

Jack’s hand fondly rests on her shoulder. “Miriam is actually my goddaughter. Her father and I were roommates in college…”

As Jack continues his story and Hannibal processes all the information in the background of his mind, he considers how a particularly large target has been painted on her back with her relationship to Jack; she’ll be a tool to keep Jack in line and who knows where that might take her? He smiles to her, telling her how lucky she is to have been chosen for this task and because her training tells her that he is harmless, she gives him a firm handshake and her pledge to keep him alive. He’s sure she will.

Abigail is assigned an agent named Zeller, a man whom seems to assume an older brother role in her life (which is logical, as he is a middle child with two younger sisters that he is no doubt equally protective of) and Abigail plays him like the harp, keeping him amused and unsuspecting of her true nature. It’s not a disingenuous relationship, but he has never had the chance to see behind her mask to decide if he actually likes her or not.

Their new shadows are like ill-fitted suits, uncomfortable and unnatural, but Lecters are patient and they accept the matter as an advancement in their game. Hannibal and Abigail pretend to be the stupid politicians that security has to deal with all the time: “Oh, we didn’t know that we weren’t supposed to leave without you”, “Oh, but it was just down to the gas station for gum”, “Oh, can’t we order pizza to the front door anymore?”

They push and stretch the boundaries of their agents to see where their weaknesses lie, where they make assumptions and mistakes. Agent Katz is honest to a fault and enjoys sharing information about her personal life; she has a fierce loyalty and is often blinded by her optimism. She enjoys being the ringleader even though she is not the agent in charge of the detail. She is easiest to distract with an
offer of breakfast. Agent Price has a weakness for expensive cigarettes and Hannibal finds himself luring the senior agent into smoking breaks in the evening to earn divulged information. He has a wife and occasional boyfriend—the wife knows about the young man, but he knows nothing of her. Agent Lass is insecure in her role as an agent—she has no fear of taking a bullet, but she can’t accept herself worthy of working for him directly. She’s smart, someone who is dedicated to being the best in her job, and Hannibal admires that she understands the gravity of her role in his life. But her self-doubt is a tool that he knows could serve him well in the future. Agent Zeller is easily emotional and doesn’t have anything that might resemble a pokerface; his concern for Abigail’s wellbeing borders on unprofessional, confusing that she’s his employer and not his family. It makes him an excellent attack dog in Hannibal’s eyes and he is pleased with how tightly Abigail holds the man’s leash.

*****

Hannibal’s Presidential debates are remembered for his wit, his attention to details, and his vast knowledge of the concerns of everyday Americans. President Frederick Chilton flounders on his understanding of certain foreign policies and is prone to raising his voice and insults, which doesn’t contrast well with Hannibal’s calm and collected demeanor.

*****

Clarice Starling is assigned to him hours before the Democratic National Committee’s Convention, a late find after he’s rejected almost two dozen men and women from acting as his aide. Her security badge names her as “Special Aide Clarice Starling” and Jack leads her to him proudly, introducing the two of them; she is dutiful and young, naïve in certain ways that don’t flatter her. He first notes that her shoes are cheap while her handbag isn’t, a faux pas that irritates him, but she isn’t stupid and quietly murmurs the names of various people who approach him, many of whom Hannibal isn’t familiar with.

So she is useful to him and he allows her to stay. Sometimes in the late nights they’re traveling on the campaign bus, she’ll fix his tea and tell him little details of her life—her dead sheriff father, her destitute mother who cleaned hotel rooms, her uncle the sheep rancher. He isn’t so much interested in her past, but he pretends he has compassion and pity, tucking the information around to be exploited later. He can tell she’s attracted to him which reminds him amusedly of summers spent at the compound, where he would find no shortage of those that wanted to be his companion. Tactfully, he never allows them to be spotted alone together—the rumours of his affairs with various staffers is flattering to his prowess, but so lowbrow.

Clarice entered the world of politics first as a cleaner at a mayor’s office and then worked her way up the ranks to a personal assistant. She’s trying to make money to put herself through college and he quietly inquires through Alana what she wants to study and where she wants to go, preparing a file that contains copies of a letter of recommendation for her, as well as a list of people whom she can call upon for favours. He grows fond of her, a hint of interest at this unsophisticated woman. She has the potential for good taste and he starts to cultivate that in her, hoping that he won’t have to boldly resort to telling her outright that she needs better clothes to be his assistant. He wishes to, but it would hurt her feelings, and that might not be a wise move in the long run.

She finds him reading Owen Wiser’s ‘The Virginian’ one evening when she brings him fresh tea and in her accent, says, “My dad used to read that book. When he died, it was one of the few things of his I got to keep.”

Hannibal doesn’t care. “Did you enjoy the book?”

She smiles and he smells her cheap perfume. “Yeah. It was…comfortable.”
“You felt close to him.”

Her eyes look at him in wonder. “Yeah.”

Oh, how everyone seems to desire a better father and he closes the book, giving her an encouraging smile to tell him more. It’s amazing how much a person will reveal to him on their own, wanting to be offered compassion and understanding. Everyone seems to see him as a kindred (if elusive) spirit, that one person whom they can relate to, as though they are capable of understanding him. But it’s not new. He finds it on the campaign trail, in the examination rooms, in the letters of hope people write to him—people reaching out to be understood and connect. He is reminded of fungi snaking out of human bodies, seeking other elements of life; he admires the parallels of a mushroom garden he created for Abigail a few years previous. The American people are a giant garden in the forest and he shall nurture and care for them, just so he can reap what they have to offer him in return.

But for now, he considers Clarice’s nightmares of lambs she can’t save.

*****

Aside from the initial introduction, Will has kept a distance from Lecter, instead watching him from his isolated position on the campaign bus; there is a private work station on the multimillion dollar bus, set up in a corner away from the other staffers so that Will can run his statistics, write his notes, and research whatever he needs. It’s not a real sanctuary, but it permits him space, a luxury in such cramped quarters. So far he’s not seen anything about Lecter that’s contradicted his personality with his message, which alarms Will to an extent because that might mean he’s actually a good person and good people don’t last long in DC.

Will is alone on the bus which had pulled over at a rest stop in Alabama and he’s wandering around the centre of the bus with his laptop, stretching his legs; disembarking with other staffers usually requires conversation and he is so sick of being overwhelmed with everyone else’s emotions.

“Tasteless.” He seethes at the article before him, the image on the screen of his computer offending him.

Lounds is publishing interviews with people who’ve claimed to have dated both Abigail and her father—dull socialites who want their pictures on one more corner of the internet and teen boys who want to gain notoriety among their social circles. There used to be a time when politician’s children were considered off limits, but god forbid the Freddie Lounds play by those rules.

“Do you have a problem with taste, Mr Graham?”

Will stumbles to the side, feeling ambushed as he realises the presidential nominee has been walking quietly behind him the whole time. He nearly snaps out something to do with taste when he hears a distinct inhale close to his ear.

“Did you just smell me?”

“Hard not to.” Lecter doesn’t blink and Will looks to the other man’s throat. “When I was a young man, I was able to smell the cancer of a professor.”

Jack enters the bus just then and says cheerfully, “Oh, are you telling him about your nose trick?”

“What did you smell on me?” Will doesn’t like where this is headed.

Lecter tilts his head slightly as though weighing the options, then declares, “Encephalitis.”
“You’re lying,” he snaps.

“You have a fevered sweetness about you.”

Will’s not sure he’s ever heard someone describe an illness in that manner and his mind—a cinema of others’ thoughts—tumbles into a kaleidoscope of synesthetic descriptions.

Lecter produces a notebook and pen, and holds it out to Will. “Would you draw a clock with the current time for me, Will?”

Will snatches the pen and notebook out of the nominee’s hand, quickly scribbling what he sees on the clock on the wall. It’s rushed and sloppy, but not bad enough to garner the response it gets. Lecter’s eyebrow lifts slightly and Jack peers over his shoulder letting out a low whistle.

“Oh, jeez,” Jack murmurs.

Fear suddenly strikes him as Lecter looks up to him. “What?”

“Jack, there should be a hospital with the necessary equipment for a brain scan at the next stop. I’ll have the hospital bill covered by the campaign funds,” Lecter says, eyes never leaving Will’s. The eye contact seems almost like an unspoken dare. “I’ll write an order for a test as your physician.”

“You’re not my physician!” Will snaps.

Lecter doesn’t seem phased by his outburst. “The Hippocratic Oath I took requires me to care for all in my presence. You are sick and I will not permit you to suffer unnecessarily.”

Jack is already shaking his head and texting someone. “I’ll have Clarice call ahead—“

“I’m not sick—it’s just a fever!” Will knows he sound hysterical.

The former Governor’s voice is so calm. “Mr Graham, your health is important to me.”

“Because I’m going to help you win,” Will spits, feeling cornered and terrified.

Lecter has large, elegant horns erupting from his skull. Will stumbles back, careful not to stare at the antlers, because surely that would be rude. Staring at another man’s horns—yes, Will was pretty sure he’d read that somewhere. Lecter’s head moves slightly and the torcs hanging from each point ring ceaselessly.

“Because the brain is the most important part of the body, along with the heart,” Lecter tells him. “A politician needs to use both sometimes. You are welcome to leave the campaign for your recovery.”

And with that, Hannibal Lecter is gone. Jack physically drags him into the Mobile, Alabama hospital to demand an MRI and CAT scan and sure enough, the entire right hemisphere was lit up from encephalitis. Will is shipped home to undergo more tests and receive a full week’s stay in a private hospital—paid for by the excellent health insurance plan the Dems provide for him. Fluids are pumped into him and he has never felt more alone in his life as he makes appointments with a prominent doctor to monitor his health. The campaign continues without him, though he stays connected by email and phone calls continuously to Jack, wanting for this to go right once in his life.

It won’t make up for what happened with Verger, but if he can get someone who isn’t fake into the White House, it might be a start.

*****
Hannibal is fitted for bulletproof suits by a special tailor in Italy during the campaign abroad, a requirement that all presidents own and he instead has the kevlar placed in all his existing suits, unable to part with the exquisite wardrobe that has taken him years to accrue. Chilton is stuck with his plain blues and charcoals, while he has maintained the flamboyant ecru's and hunting plaids that have earned him the title of ‘best dressed candidate’.

He also takes the opportunity of being in his mother’s home country to order a better perfume for Clarice and has it slipped into her luggage. She never says anything about it, but after Italy he catches the fragrant, sweet notes on her skin. There’s a hint of warmth to the perfume and it makes him smile.

*****

Bedelia’s Vice Presidential debate is remembered for her condescending smiles at her opponent and her scathing comments. Where people worried that Hannibal might be too polite to deal with issues, Democrats feel a sense of relief that they’ll always have her fire in the White House. Former Governor Mitt Romney is considered a flop right out of the gate and it’s noted that President Chilton keeps distance between them afterwards.

*****

Immediately after the incredibly successful interview on the Daily Show, Abigail and Hannibal enter the Secret Service’s SUV, sitting side by side and allow their facades to drop.

“That went well,” he comments in Lithuanian as the rest of the agents and his personal assistant climb in.

She purses her lips slightly, nose wrinkling at the bridge. “Now everyone thinks I listen to boy bands—all because Uncle Jack told me to.” She glances up from her phone. “And I like taking photos of myself.”

He smiles, because he doesn’t find anything wrong with what she tweets. “I like seeing you in my updates.”

She seems pleased and returns her attention to her phone. “I like it when everything goes according to plan.”

Hannibal thinks of how eagerly Jon Stewart ate out of his palm. “He was easy to direct.”

From the back seat, Clarice leans over and hands him his personal cellphone. “Governor, it’s Jack.”

He accepts it, giving a polite nod to the redhead. “Thank you, Clarice.”

*****

Hannibal finds Agent Lass a refreshing traveling partner during campaigning and he can tell that she truly has come to believe that in November he’ll be elected as the forty-sixth President of the United States. He’s trying not to become weary already with thoughts of how tightly he’ll have to grip the reins of the administration he’ll be ripping out of Chilton’s hold, though he’s eager to have the opportunity to look smugly at his opponents and sit behind the desk that this country considers a throne. A king who works, a servant of the people—Hannibal will only rule this land so that his name lives on and to make the world a bit more streamlined to manage. He absolutely loathes how clogged the system is and if only for his sense of order will he make sure its fixed. He sometimes fantasises that he finishes his eight year sentence as president lauded and adored for policies and changing American government for decades to come, and then is caught by law enforcement as the
Chesapeake Ripper. The history books wouldn’t know how to record his legacy.

Hannibal looks over one of the case files as he sits in one of the arm chairs on the campaign bus; it’s just past three in the afternoon and they’re passing through Oregon. His employees are busy working, allowing him space and he uses the opportunity to relax by reliving one of his favourite deaths. The photos are particularly nasty and he studies them, admiring the frozen expression of horror on the man’s face as he lies across the bed of his pickup; his sweat had been particularly pungent, stinking of fear and too many processed meats. He’d made an exceptional brisket from this ambulance driver.

“Kind of weird isn’t it?” Lass’ voice is soft.

He glances up from his file to the arm chair across from his; he is not pleased to be interrupted. “Pardon?”

She points a finger to the file in his hand. “The Chesapeake Ripper. His pattern.”

Interest is sparked. “His pattern?”

“Sorry, I’m a bit of a crime buff. I’m tracking his movements over the past decade. Not sloppy, that’s for sure. Oh, I’m sorry. You probably don’t want to talk about it.”

He doesn’t want to hear her apology—he wants to hear more. “No, I’m curious. You may speak freely.”

“He never kills during the autumn.”

No, that’s because Abigail must focus on her schooling.

“And while he strikes all across the board—different races, genders, socioeconomic groups—he’s particular to people of wealth and importance in the community.”

All are capable of sinning, but those with power and influence need to be curbed the most.

“So while I think he’s angry at those people, I also think that he’s in there with them. Or can at least get close to them.”

I’ve been granted access everywhere, dear girl. You can’t possibly fathom my reach into their lives.

“I heard that the FBI can't get a good profile on him?”

He nods once. “From what I've heard as well.”

She worries her lower lip as she considers saying more and he is patient, tilting his head as an indication he wants to hear more.

“I think he keeps his trophies where everyone can see them,” she finally says and his heart skips a beat.

“And why do you believe that?”

“He wants their deaths to be public and humiliating—he wouldn’t hide what he takes. He wants people to admire them.”

Oh, this girl is brilliant.
“How do you suppose he’d manage that?” he asks and she pauses again, this time thoughtful and not from self doubt.

“I bet he’s an artist. Maybe he incorporates the parts into his work.”

“Why do you believe he’s an artist, Miriam?”

“A handful of his previous crimes have mimicked famous pieces of art—Rodin’s ‘The Thinker’, um, Jean-Baptiste Oudry’s ‘A Hare and a Leg of Lamb’, and ‘Woundman’. It would make sense if someone with an understanding of classic composition was killing these people.” She shrugs, her smile hopeful that he might think she’s clever.

He is quick to mask any sense of bittersweet satisfaction that there is someone in his presence that can finally appreciate who he is, that he’s not some common killer or delusional lunatic. He is an artist who creates masterpieces that deserve to be seen by thousands, memorialised in a gallery outside of his mind palace. Instead of a Presidential library, he’d rather a museum that contains everyone he’s ever rid society of: there could glass cases containing the remains of those he’d executed under the guise of the Chesapeake Ripper and a special wing dedicated to those who’d been killed in collaboration with Abigail; an exhibit on Srebrenica, Bosnia and the soldiers he’d butchered to feed the war torn city; a repository of his recipes and detailed quotes from guests at his dinner table that had moaned over the decadence of the food they stuffed in their mouths; an arrangement of bronze plaques that bore the names of every single law enforcement officer that had failed to catch him; a hallway of photographs for those that died on his operating table through no fault of his own—it had simply been their time; and the garden could contain the mushroom farm he’d made for his daughter.

But this will never come to pass and a part of him is suddenly mournful as he sees the path their future together must take. Miriam is so worthy of his praise for finding him. As he listens to her continuing her mostly correct theories, he begins to plan for her end.

*****

Clarice Starling is…a threat. Abigail doesn’t like the way the young aide looks at her father, not wanting a single distraction for him while he’s running for office. And Clarice doesn’t care for her—she can tell. She was a smart woman, but she treated Abigail like an innocent, over privileged child. And Abigail is very privileged, but she’s not innocent and she’s not spoilt. She understands hard work and discipline, the same skills that have taken young Miss Starling from the dirt roads of West Virginia to the White House, and no, perhaps she’d been fortunate with a better upbringing, but she won’t have anyone question her importance in Hannibal Lecter’s world.

Her father kisses her forehead and tells her to let the matter go, and she pretends to for his sake, but as with many things, Abigail would like Clarice better at the dinner table.

*****

A joke!

Two cannibals are having dinner. One says,

“I hate republicans.”

Her father smiles and replies, “Then just eat the noodles.”

*****
It is New Year’s Eve, still and he’s at the grand party Bedelia’s thrown in the Baltimore Museum of Art; various familiar faces are congratulating him on the election, all leaving hints of their desire to be invited to the single official inaugural ball. He makes no promises—he’s already spent their substantial contributions to his campaign and doesn’t feel obligated to serve them any further. He navigates them towards his cousin, watching her draw the attention to herself, and he slips away. He sits with Clarice at the base of Rodin’s ‘The Thinker’, their glasses of champagne forgotten. Light from the city outside streams through the windows and the sounds of the other party goers is distant enough that it can be ignored as well as alert him to approaching company.

His eyes trace over her face and her lips part slightly as he lingers on a small mark on her cheek; the dark spot is usual covered by concealer, but he much prefers seeing it. The moment seems intimate enough for him to speak of her.

“This is gunshot residue.”

She nods once. “My uncle was teaching me how to use a rifle. Misfired.”

The rancher uncle who killed lambs, he thinks, marking her with something so lovely. He reaches out and touches her cheek, tilting her head slightly.

“Courage.” He brushes a thumb over the small scar. “The position symbolises courage.”

“I, uh, have never heard that before.” She’s blushing, but she hasn’t pulled away, her soft eyes still locked on his. “Do you think I’m courageous, then?”

“Oh, most assuredly. I have little interest in those who lack that particular trait.”

She is lovely and he could have her tonight if he wished; her cheap shoes thrown to the bedroom floor and her dress draped across an armchair as he lays claim to her body on the bed. He muses on the ridiculous Pandora bracelet around her wrist, if she’d want a bead or charm from him to commemorate their night together; a smirk nearly crosses his lips as he thinks of her buying something with red, white, and blue. As he considers kissing that lovely neck, he catches a hint of her perfume and catches the underlying warmth of sugar. Of sweetness.

His mind is reminded of encephalitis.

“I’m afraid I must leave now, Special Aide Starling.” He leans back from her, his body posture making it clear that he has withdrawn interest.

“Oh,” she utters, her disappointment clear.

“Prior commitments.”

“Right.” She knows he’s lying and its regrettable to embarrass her, but he knows her self-esteem will insist that it’s because he’s a gentleman and not because he’s thinking of…another gentleman.

“Good evening, Clarice.” He kisses the back of her hand and leaves.

The drive home is quiet and allows him time to contemplate what he’s been distracted by. Upon reaching the house, he softly walks to his daughter’s room, wanting to have her attention. He finds her fast asleep in her bed and he gently strokes her head to wake her up. She stirs and sits up, her eyelids still heavy and she frowns, rubbing at her face.

“Everything okay?” she mumbles.
“Everything is fine.” He gives her a smile. “I merely wished to check you.”

“Ah.” She knows this game and after yawning, she asks, “Want to make me something to eat?”

He extends a hand to her, beckoning her from the bed. “I believe that could be arranged.”

He finds her robe and helps her into it, then walks with her to the kitchen, hand in hand.

“How was your party?” she asks politely as she sits in the kitchen’s armchair, giving him a way to begin the conversation he truly wants.

“It went well.” He considers what is easy to make so as not to make her wait and settles on reheating börek he made the other morning. As he carries the dish to the countertop, he announces, “I’m going to replace Clarice.”

Abigail isn’t stupid and understand immediately that if Clarice was merely being fired, it wouldn’t require dialogue. No, this is about death and because he’s an excellent father, he will discuss it with her so that she thoroughly understands his decision.

“Won’t it point back to us?” She looks at him curiously.

“No. We’re not going to take anything from her.”

At this, his daughter is cautious. “How can we honour her if we’re not taking anything?”

He curses Hobbs for keeping the asinine need to ‘honour’ their kills in her mind, even though Clarice’s death will not be in vain.

“She will serve a higher purpose. She is not going to go to waste,” he promises.

In the five minutes it takes the pastry to reheat in the pan, wrapped tightly in a piece of parchment paper and they bide their time in silence; he plates the pastry and adds a sprig of mint before collecting a fork and napkin. Her plate is carried into the dining room and he seats her beside his place at the head of the table.

Abigail takes the first bite of the börek and asks, “Why do you want to replace her?”

“You don’t like her.” He’s curious how she’ll react if he places the blame on her shoulders. “I can see how jealous you are of her presence in my life.”

She picks at the food with her fork, unapologetic. “I don’t like competing for your attention.”

He nods—he’ll accept her selfishness because it’s a facet of her that he created from scratch. “There’s someone else I have in mind, as well.”

There. Now she sees that this is really about his wants. “Who?”

The name is one he’s thought of often in the recent days. “Will Graham. Do you remember him?”

“Of course.” Her eyes are wide and the food is forgotten. “Why him? Isn’t he the one who got sick during the campaign?”

Hannibal is careful with his words. “He has a beautiful gift, this Will. Pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine—and maybe some other points of view that scare him. It’s an uncomfortable gift, Abigail. Perception’s a tool that’s pointed on both ends.”
Abigail looks surprised and her brow furrows. “Even us?”

He matches her gaze deeply. “Especially us.”

“Why do you want him?”

“Potential, Abigail.”

Oh, how she loves that word. “Like you saw in me?”

“Yes.”

Abigail returns her attention back to her food, chewing over his words more than her börek. He waits patiently as she reaches a determination. “What if you’re wrong about him?”

She wasn’t questioning him out of doubt, but out of worry—it was quite touching. She brings a forkful of börek to his mouth and he accepts it, chewing and swallowing the pastry that contains scrap meats of an uncouth religious zealot.

“We’ll rid ourselves of him,” he says simply.

“Like…”? Clarice’s name needn’t be spoken.

“Yes.”

Abigail’s eyes flit over to the clock on the wall and her voice is casual, “It’s almost midnight.”

He can’t hold back the smile and teases, “Do you want my first kiss of the new year?”

She feigns disinterest. “Maybe.”

He purses his lips and leans towards her, which causes her to grin as she giggles. This is something would have done when she was much younger and he finds himself missing those days often enough to wish for them.

“Don’t make me wait, Abigail,” he warns her and she begins to laugh harder, but she manages to sober herself quick enough that she can peck her lips against his.

“Happy New Year,” she says.

Satisfied, he grins at her. “Happy New Year, Abigail.”

*****

Hannibal is sworn in twice: once on Sunday the 20th of January, and then at the public inaugural ceremony on Monday the 21st.

His first inauguration falls on his forty-eighth birthday, a cold, overcast morning. Their home in Maryland is abuzz with energy of Secret Service agents, staffers, a handful of Kennedys seeking to act as ‘emotional support’ for the new First Family. Hannibal accepts their presence graciously, though it’s all unnecessary; the important things in their home have been secreted away to Bedelia’s property in Boring, the possessions that will wait for them here are left in their place, and the ones that are to be brought have already been carefully packed for the journey to their new home.

*Everything* in the kitchen is coming with them to the White House.
He retreats to the kitchen with his daughter to fix her breakfast; she hums the national anthem and he browns the last of a music critic that had given a scathing review of a performance he had found quite pleasant. When there’s a lull in people coming in to congratulate him and ask him completely asinine questions (“Are you excited?”), he holds his finger to his lips and pours two thimblefuls of champagne into her orange juice. She smiles broadly at him, still humming. Agent Lass comes in as his daughter begins to drink the mimosa and tells them she’s excited to see him sworn in—she’s never seen anyone sworn in before, isn’t that neat? Hannibal exchanges knowing smiles with Abigail at the young woman’s fate.

As mandated by the Twentieth Amendment to the United States Constitution, all presidents begin their new term on January 20 at noon and Hannibal is to be no exception, despite the day falling on a Sunday. The official ceremony is held privately in the Blue Room of the White House, Abigail holding their treasured family bible as he’s sworn in; it was once owned by Olimpia Lecter, blessed by Pope John XXIII in 1959. It holds no religious value to either of them, but the symbolism of having family in everything they do is so important. As the movers officially begin to bring their belongings into the White House, transitioning between the Chilton Administration and the Lecter Administration, they drive across town in the Presidential motorcade to Naval Observatory One, where Bedelia is to be sworn in as Vice President. Hannibal holds the President Kennedy’s bible during her oath, watching her eyes tear up as her fingers rest on the gilt wording on the worn leather cover.

When the White House Press Corp asks if he’s going to be doing anything special for his birthday, Hannibal informs them that he’ll be waiting to celebrate his birthday on a later date, perhaps something special in the spring. In truth, Abigail already gave him his presents the night before: a small porcelain dove for his desk (“Because a president should pretend he likes peace.”), a set of 22k cufflinks and matching tie pin (“I knew you were going to order them. I saw your note.”), and letter from Angelo Poliziano to Lorenzo de’ Medici (“I can’t tell you where I got it from! That would spoil the surprise!”) that’s mostly likely been purchased from ill-reputable sources. He’d been very touched that she remembered the story of the Pazzi who’d once been disemboweled for his crimes.

On Monday the 21st, a public ceremony is held at the West Front of the United States Capitol. Hannibal and Abigail awake in the White House, starting with a simple breakfast (omelets of spinach and salesman) and a cigarette split between the two of them. Then they dress—a charcoal suit and maroon shirt with matching tie for him, the rich colours exuding power; she wears a deep maroon coat over her blue dress, looking exactly the role of the Perfect Daughter, the Dutiful First Lady.

There is a performance from the fifth-grade chorus of Public School 22, along with the reading of the inaugural poem and singing of the national anthem. Myrlie Evers-Williams delivers the invocation and the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir sings ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’—Hannibal can hear one of the altos is off-key and he promises himself not to let that ruin the day. He and Abigail hold hands, exchanging few words between themselves because the day is starting to feel like pursuit, that there is to be a conquest at the end of all this fanfare.

Abigail holds the bible the late Joseph Kennedy Jr was sworn in on, her smile a mirror of Bedelia’s. Slender spider fingers of ivory, strong enough to crush a man’s windpipe when provoked; she’s wearing Mother’s favourite ring on her right hand and Father’s rosary in her coat pocket. Hannibal falls in love with his child all over again as his cousin is ceremonial sworn in before the nation. Bedelia is at his side and as he recites his own oath of office—his accent proudly colouring each word—a single diamond of a tear slides down her cheek.

He insists on only one inaugural ball, which upsets some of the donors who were expecting lavish and multiple events, but most are willing to grumpily admit, ‘Well, it’s more fiscally responsible this way,’ and he starts his administration off on the note of ‘Sensible’. Were he less popular, it could
have easily been considered ‘Miserly’. There are no popular singers who’ve scored Top 40 titles at the event—there will only be classical music tonight. Like Uncle John and Aunt Jacqueline, Hannibal and Bedelia have every intention of bringing back a level of prestige the office of the President deserves to have. He shares the first dance of the night with his cousin, who’s wearing a pewter dress and a sugary perfume, both Dior. They smile at one another, her lips nearing an ugly smirk and his a shade smugger than usual as the both glide elegantly to Akiko Kitagawa playing ‘Clair de lune’. There are millions of eyes on them and they both revel in the thought that everyone in the world can look at them, but will never actually see them. He could devour her right here and now, draped in his arms as he chews through her jugular, spilling her blood across the seal of the President of the United States.

“And you said you’d never get into politics,” she says fondly, proudly.

He is willing to concede that this night is more to fulfill her childhood dream than for his own enjoyment. “Perhaps even I made mistakes on occasion, dearest cousin.”

“No. Never you,” she promises.

The Baltimore Philharmonics takes over to accompany Ms Kitagawa and when Abigail is presented for the first dance between President and First Lady, they spin and move to Tchaikovsky’s ‘Swan Lake, Op.20, No.2, Waltz’, commanding the entire room with their elegance and precision for a full seven minutes long which leaves many very impressed with the stamina needed for such a waltz. She’s wearing her favourite red gown from Paris, her long auburn hair pulled into an elegant twist at the back of her neck and as their feet master every step they must take, she speaks only once. “Here we are.” He echoes the words back to her, their bodies live wires of pent up energy, ready to kill the next person that makes a wrong move. The moment they finish, the room applauds and Abigail laughs behind her hands, feigning humility; he bows to her and she dips into a gracious curtsy.

Clarice is wearing something in a delicate spring green that his daughter had ordered for her; it’s a peace offering for what is to come. She indulges in champagne and looks thoroughly embarrassed when she has to turn him down because she doesn’t know how to dance. Alas for her, this isn’t the place to teach people the proper steps to the easy music and he mourns what could have been. Tobias dances with Abigail twice and Hannibal sees the loneliness in him, something aching and wounded. He considers that Tobias might try to form a different kind of relationship with her and he allows himself to feel jealousy for a moment before crushing it; he shall ensure that tonight is the last time Tobias and Abigail have contact with one another.

The night ends for him at midnight and together he and Abigail strangle a woman in a very poorly secured service passage in the building; she’s one of Chilton’s staffers and somewhat drunk, trying to proposition Hannibal for a new job at the White House. He and Abigail smile at one another and end her existence in short order, stealing her jewellery to imply it was nothing more than a robbery and stuff her body into a maintenance closet. Afterwards, both Lecters are reprimanded by their details for sneaking off because, ‘What if someone wanted to hurt you?’ Hannibal assures them it won’t happen again, the emerald necklace tucked into his tuxedo and Abigail’s hand held delicately in his.

*****///*****

Of course, the promise not to leave their agents behind is a promise short lived. Five days short of the first full month in office, Abigail and her father sneak out of Boring House where they’re staying for the weekend, sending all the staffers to home for a belated St Valentine’s day. Only Secret Service stays at the property and they’re easy enough to get around, albeit more thrilling an evasion than usual. Getting from Boring back to Washington DC in a UHaul truck they steal from the sleepy town is simple, almost effortless. Abigail talks about the television show she’s recently become
emotionally invested in, trying to convince her father to watch it with her and he successfully debates his way out of any obligation to do so. In turn, he attempts to convince her that now might be the time to start a charity foundation so that when she turns eighteen she can skip university for heading the matters of philanthropy instead; she promises to consider the matter, but reminds him that she still has to be the First Lady and she can’t let anything get in the way of that because she represents him. He assures her she’s correct and she wonders how long he’ll wait before he brings up the matter again; after all, it’s only a matter of time before she bends to his will.

They only have a small time frame to work in and while Abigail is accustomed to the rigid structure of their usual hunts, they are going to have to work off instinct and improvisation, the night only an abstract and sparsely planned. She likes the thought of exact outcomes and trying to solve her way from Point A to Point B, and knows how (secretly) anxious her father is because he likes exact order and scripts to work from, so she holds his hand, promising him that he’ll get everything he wants.

Like clockwork, Clarice jogs at ten at night through Folger Park in the nation’s capitol, and tonight is no exception. Her daily schedule was documented in her file so that the Secret Service could keep tabs on her if needed, but who wanted to follow around poor, country, white trash in the city? Earlier that afternoon, Abigail had watched her father recommend during a phone call that she clear her mind and go out for her run that night regardless of the frosty forecast, that enduring the cold was invigorating and she would feel much better for it. And ever the obedient and trusting young woman, she promised she would. They’re already prepared to track her to her apartment, but it will be extra effort that takes up too much time. They simply must have faith she’ll do as she’s told.

They’re wearing disguises, a blonde wig for her under a black tam, her father using glasses and a baseball hat. The only distinct feature about the two of them is that they’re completely in dark clothing, only their faces visible. Folger Park has a distinct concrete wall that formerly held drinking fountains and is lined with a long bench. Tall trees that are barren of leaves create a dark and sheltering curtain to hide them as they crouch behind the fountain, waiting. She and her father slow their breathing and suck on ice cubes to keep their breath from showing up in the frigid night air.

Abigail has a poured out water on the walkway before the concrete bench and fountain that’s frozen into a large icy patch; soon they see the lone jogger that could only be Clarice—red hair, shapely hips, muscular legs, head held up proudly—and Clarice falls down hard on the icy ground, exhaling sharply but not shouting out. As she rights herself, a soft voice with a West Virginia accent croons, “Hey, Baby. Hey, Baby. Did you fall down?”

Clarice turns to look at the large concrete bench the two Lecters are hiding behind and she takes a step forward. “He-hello?”

“Did you fall down?” her father repeats, his call almost dreamlike.

Clarice, as if in a trance, limps slightly around the back of the bench and fountain to find her father, who greets her politely.

“Good evening, Clarice.”

“Mr Presi—“

Clarice’s death is swift and tender, befitting the woman with her clever mind, her father’s favourite rube with her expensive handbag and cheap shoes. And because all lives taken must be transformed into art, Abigail drapes Clarice’s body on the fountain’s steps carefully, alluring and shapely, her broken neck letting her look back over her shoulder with empty, empty eyes. La Grande Odalisque.
Hand in hand, Mischa and her brother run across the park, eager to get to their next point of interest, their bodies aflame with the adrenaline needed to get them far enough from the body to the motorcycle they are going to steal. They rarely use motorcycles for transportation because they attract far more attention than needed, but tonight they require something small to ditch and can navigate narrow alleyways. She climbs on the back and wraps her arms around her father’s waist, excited at the sheer danger of riding around at high speed without helmets on.

The stolen motor cycle takes them to their next location, one that Jack Crawford often tried to convince his goddaughter to move from because it’s not safe. Miriam Lass is a night owl and once admitted aloud that she enjoys roaming the city late at night to clear her head. Abigail and her father have been carefully planting the thought into her head that nothing is more liberating than the nighttime excursions and Miriam—ever impressionable Miriam—is more than willing to be manipulated into the thought that, yes, it would be wise to go out every night and hone her agent’s instincts. There is an alleyway beside her rental and Abigail stands closest to the sidewalk, her father crouched and hiding behind a dumpster. Abigail really wants to smoke, but she knows that it will just create a cigarette butt that shall have to be disposed of, one more potential way of getting caught, so she just shifts impatiently.

Finally the woman of the hour is spotted, walking back to her rental. Abigail whistles a ‘yoo-hoo’ and Miriam stops to look at her. Abigail waves her fingers playfully to her father’s agent. Miriam stares, frowning and Abigail whistles again, grinning wolfishly and steps backwards into the alley, luring the other woman forward.

“Abigail?” Miriam’s steps quicker into the shadows of the alley, almost in position. “What are—“

Her father is already behind the young woman, his arms wrapping tightly around her upper arms and a strong hand around her throat. Abigail politely turns her head, hands clasped in front of her as she tries not to focus on the soothing words her father was whispering to the struggling Miriam Lass. There is certainly pleasure in killing her as there was always pleasure in besting someone who was actually worthy of fighting; Miriam is whimpering and struggling, putting up a fairly good fight as one of her hands reaches up to grab at her attacker’s hair, desperately pulling without gaining any real purchase. Abigail knows that her father is trying to drag out their final moment together, savouring her drive to live and her clever mind, that when he breathes, “Yes,” to her unspoken question, he’s confirming that he is—of all people—the Chesapeake Ripper.

Limp in his arms, her father cradles the now lifeless body of the young agent who’d wanted nothing more than to be appreciated and find the Chesapeake Ripper. Tonight she found both.

“Such a brave girl,” he says proudly.

Abigail makes a non committal noise, reaching out to smooth her father’s hair, tender on the scalp that is sure to be sore. Miriam is dead and is practically forgotten to Abigail by now, but the thought of him suffering is almost unbearable.

“Can you carry her on your own?”

She’s shocked he’s offering her the chance to transport their quarry as they will potentially be sacrificing speed, which could mean they get caught. While she knows that her father is just dying for people know exactly how clever he is, she isn’t interested in the consequences that come with notoriety.

This is a test and she won’t let him down.

She looks down at the body and calculates quickly. “I just need a boost to get her up.”
With the quick assistance from her father, Miriam’s body is lifted up and over her shoulders. Miriam is solid and beautifully built, her body made efficient with her training as a Secret Service agent and silently Abigail praises her, knowing that not a single ounce will go to waste now.

“Ready?” he asks her.

She nods. “Ready.”

They hurry down the alley way, her strides long to accommodate the new sensation of being top-heavy, but they make their way into the parking garage that has always lacked proper surveillance cameras to the burgundy Oldsmobile they had decided to steal for their trip back to the state of Maryland. Miriam’s body is dropped into the trunk carefully so that meat doesn’t bruise and her father lauds her for her assistance in the night’s mission. He drives and she sits next to him in the front seat; the radio comes on, playing tired 80s love songs. In a playful mood, he sings them to her and she laughs as they make the journey to Maryland.

Within this particular Baltimore storage locker is a basic eight-foot folding table, multiple plastic drop cloths, a small freezer unit, a blue plastic fifty-gallon container filled with quicklime for storing the waste, and various medical tools they’ll need for dismembering the body. Abigail is quickest to strip people of their clothing so she quickly cuts them off the agent, dropping them into a trash bag. As he starts the bone saw, she reverently runs her hand through Miriam’s hair, noting the faint textures of hair spray and sweat.

“What are you thinking, Abigail?” her father asks curiously.

She looks up to him. “Just wondering how sweet she’ll taste.”

He gives her a smile. “Tonight we shall enjoy her brains fresh.”

“Good, I’m hungry,” she admits.

She watches curiously as her father quickly removes all her organs with quick and clinical precision; she’d wondered what Miriam looks like inside and to her disappointment, it is exactly the same as any other person. As she bags each piece of meat he hands over to her, she listens to her father describe the ingredients he’s already organised in preparation for the night’s meal.

Canisters of blood are collected that shall be used sausages, reductions, and soups. Skin is harvested in sheets to be fried in small batches as snacks. Her liver shall become foie gras and her kidneys shall find their way into a meat pie. A lovely tongue will be marinated to be served with cranberry sauce and delicate cheeks will be sautéed with butter and herbs. Flanks to be grilled and lungs to be braised. Her right arm is severed and then bagged ‘for insurance’ her father explains; the left is stripped of meat that will ground along with other lesser cuts to make sausage and perhaps a meatloaf or hamburgers for her birthday.

They’re left with little more than bones and her father bags them as well, selecting one to saw into smaller pieces to bring home so they can consume the marrow inside. What’s left of Miriam’s head is wrapped up in a cotton mesh bag and will be added to her father’s home brewing operation in another locker in Baltimore. Beer for Alana, no doubt. Abigail makes a face, wishing he’d make wine for her instead and she doesn’t care if that’s a greedy thought.

He allows her to drive them to the second locked across town and he lies down in the backseat of the car, politely giving her reassuring directions for the night’s route while complimenting her on her work. They’re carrying fifty pounds of meat and bone each, plus a few hermetic canisters of blood in her pack and Miriam’s head in her father’s. The night is freezing cold and Abigail is grateful she put
on leggings beneath her jeans; she can only hope that the trek back to Boring goes smoothly so that
the frigid weather doesn’t take its toll on her. She rolls down the passenger window and throws
the cellphone off the bridge; Miriam’s clothing will be burned in the fireplace tonight along with their
own. In Baltimore, they deliver Miriam’s head to the wine cask that will brew Alana’s new batch of
beer and they steal another car that barely looks capable of getting them to Boring, but will be perfect
for leaving in the town’s scrapyard, blending in with the other cars that will be demolished. When
they do abandon the car, they remove the plates and sneak out the back to run through the woods
towards Aunt Bee’s property. Boring is so quiet at night and as planned, they run into no one.

Her father pulls her hat tighter over her head and pulls the hood of her jacket up over that as well.
The packs they carry are heavy, but Abigail hardly notices as they run through the trees. Her muscles
are hot and tight, needing to be used completely. Their feet land in snow and decaying leaves, both
adept enough to know where to step and what to avoid. The snow shall melt enough come daylight
that their tracks will become vague, left by a deer or possibly a bear.

“I love you,” she hisses as they slink through the trees.

The surrounding plot of woods are owned in name by her father’s lawyer, so they’re able to use the
land unimpeded; there is a hidden passage way disguised in a pile of rocks that connects them to
Aunt Bee’s property and while they are almost definitely home safe, they don’t stop running through
the dark, earthen tunnel until they’re under the boat house, to which their pace becomes a light jog.
Once inside the house, they stalk quietly through the walls to the kitchen which is completely void of
anyone attempting to get a midnight snack. Feverishly, they stock the freezer with their kill—placing
the brains in the refrigerator for their late night meal—and only when they get back into the secret
passage way do they smile at one another and breathe. Quietly and carefully they make their way
upstairs to her room where the passage exits; Abigail takes this opportunity to hold onto his hand.

They finally climb out of the closet in her room, greeted by warm air and the scent of cedar and they
discard their now empty packs by the foot of her bed. There are careful concocted electrolyte drinks
waiting for them in her room and they down them quickly to prevent dehydration and muscle cramps
from their excursion.

“Would you like a shower or a bath tonight?” her father asks, his voice still unrecovered and quiet.

“Shower. If I get in the bathtub, I’ll just fall asleep.” She caresses his knuckles with her thumb to
show him love. “Thank you.”

He returns the delicate affection as though he agrees with her that it’s a good way of showing they
care for one another. “My pleasure, Abigail.”

He leaves for the connected bathroom they’re sharing as she begins to strip out of her clothes, folding
each piece neatly by the fireplace, beside the stack of Miriam’s clothing. Bundled in the warm robe
that had been waiting on the end of the bed, she starts a fire so their clothes will be gone by the time
he has an opportunity to be alone with them. The last thing either of them need to do is get so
overconfident that they keep trophies. Abigail tosses the clothing into the fireplace one piece at a time
to make sure everything burns properly. On the mantle place is a photo of Great Aunt Jacqueline
wearing blue; Abigail pretends she’s looking at the Holy Mother and places her hands together in
prayer.

“And so it shall come to pass. Amen.”

On Sunday night they return to the White House, having been informed of Clarice Starling’s death
and of Miriam Lass’ disappearance; Hannibal tells Agent Price,

“I’d like to go to see where she was killed.”

Price is hesitant. “Mr President, I don't think that's a very good idea.”

Hannibal isn’t going to take no for an answer and somberly, head bowed, explains, “I’d like to see where Clarice spent her last moments. And Abigail and I would like to place flowers there, so that if she is watching, she'll know how deeply she is missed.”

No one wants to ever tell the President 'no’ and so on Monday they are escorted to Folger Park under heavy Secret Service protection, everyone so antsy, as though the killer might reappear at any moment and they just won’t know what to do with themselves. They fumble with their movements and words as the Lecters glide past them effortlessly; the media vans have created congestion on the roads surrounding the park and every reporter is attempting to leave their spot of coverage for a chance to watch the First Family visit the location his assistant was found. Questions are shouted at them and curious onlookers watch, wondering what will happen next.

“Have you considered that the killer might try to return to the crime scene to see their work being evaluated by the police?” Hannibal finally ventures after the detective in charge of the investigation gives them a very dry, run-of-the-mill explanation that tells them practically nothing.

The detective gives him a look that suggests he doesn’t appreciate any advice from anyone on how to do his job, Commander-in-Chief or not. “Yes, we have, Mr President. There’s someone recording and documenting everyone who appears here and we’ll be running a check on anyone of interest.”

Abigail looks at the spot that once held Clarice and speaks quietly. “Sometimes killers like to insert themselves into the investigation to see what others think of what they’ve done. I saw that on TV.”

The detective’s tone is considerably more gentle as he responds to Abigail’s input. “We’re considering that, too, First Lady.”

Abigail lights a candle at the base of the fountain, and they kneel before it, saying a prayer to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, ignoring the gawkers and news agencies. They leave a bouquet of large scarlet peonies and both manage to shed a few tears as they’re led away by their very anxious Secret Service detail.

When they return to the White House, completely abuzz with ‘What do you think happened?’, he holds his daughter’s hands warmly and with his brow furrowed and jaw firm, he tells his child,

“If you’ll excuse me, I must call Miriam’s family to offer my thoughts and prayers. They mustn’t give up hope that their daughter is okay.”

Abigail nods her head, pretending she has pity for the Lass family’s plight. “Please tell them that we all are thinking of them in this trying time and that no resource is being wasted to find her.”

He kisses her on the cheek, then allows the agents to escort them in separate directions.

*****

Abigail sits beside Hannibal at the funeral for Clarice; West Virginia is experiencing an incredible cold spell and the hole beside Sheriff Starling’s grave is filling with small flakes of snow. Hundreds of doves are released as Clarice’s casket is lowered into the ground and a trio of singers softly begin an exquisite and heart wrenching rendition of Fauré’s ‘Requiem, In Paradisim’, his lullaby for the dead.
For the previous three days Clarice’s body has lie in honour at the State Building, the second woman and one of only three people ever given the privilege. She’d been guarded by very solemn looking Secret Service agents, her casket open to reveal her eternal slumber. It had been beautiful. Hannibal had an elegant dress ordered for her to be clothed in, something expensive, tasteful, and the colour of her eyes. Something Clarice would have been very proud to wear. If she couldn’t have it in life, perhaps she could have it in death. Her hands had been clasped around his own copy of ‘The Virginian’, a very loving inscription written inside—“Dear Clarice, I imagine you sitting in a dark basement room bent over papers and computer screens at clerk’s distance, that mocks the prairie distance in your eyes. A zoo hawk, one wing hanging down. Is that accurate? Please tell me truly, Special Aide Starling. Regards, Hannibal Lecter, M.D”—he doesn’t like writing in books as a rule, but some things need to be permanent.

Abigail had stroked her thumb over Clarice’s clasped hands, honouring her. This is their art here on display. Freddie Lounds had somehow managed to sneak a camera into the State Building to take photos of the body and Hannibal couldn’t be more pleased because now he doesn’t have to rely on his memory alone. He wants everyone to know how humanely she was killed, how Abigail had turned her into the woman she’d grown up loving, how he had taken care of her name so that everyone in the country would remember her, how he had dressed her in the finest materials and structuring, how he and Abigail have said prayers for her. They’d snuck the emerald necklace they’d claimed the night of his inauguration into her casket, a benefaction for her sacrifice so that they might have someone they needed, slipping it around her neck and beneath the neckline of the dress.

And now she’s with the man she could never let go: her daddy.

“Hey, Baby,” his daughter whispers. “Did you fall down?”

///***///
(Hannibal and Bedelia, age 9)

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Twenty-Five

And so September started with a family. Will seemed at a loss how to handle himself, wishing there were manuals for this sort of thing. He arrived on the second, a Monday, with every intention of asking Hannibal directly if they could sit down and define his official role as Abigail’s second parent and how they were going manage this without anyone finding out; it was terrifying, because he hated anything that could be perceived as confrontational and the instinct that he wasn’t fully accepted still nagged at him. But his palm felt like a badge of honour, a secret marking that meant ‘us, the three of us, together,’ in a language only they could understand. He found himself picking at the scab so that he could ensure a scar actually formed there, so he could look at the connection he had with what was his.

Georgia had noticed Abigail’s cut across her palm and had commented to Will about it during a lunch together in the cafeteria at which point he’d focused on the grilled cheese sandwich in his hands (had American cheese always tasted this chemically?), pretending he had nothing to say on the matter. He hadn’t removed the rope bracelet that Abigail had put on him, enjoying that first bit of ownership she had over him, and kept it tucked under his shirt cuff. Thankfully the material dried quickly and it hadn’t developed any odd mildew scene.

Before the second week began, Will arrived for breakfast as usual and found the young woman he considered his own waiting for him outside of the elevator.

“Hello, Abigail.”

“Hey,” she greeted.

“How are you this morning?” Sometimes when he couldn’t sleep, he found himself drawn into a horrible cycle of imagining her having a nightmare and he being miles away, could do nothing to help her.

But she smiled, giving him the lips painted for cupid. “I’m good. Did you sleep well?”

“I did. And you?”

Her arm wrapped warmly around his waist and his instinctually draped over her shoulder, pulling her a bit closer; other staffers were under very strict orders not to enter the Residence anymore without explicit request by the First Family, Will being the only exception to the rule. Rumours had been floating around the halls that something had been stolen or that someone had spilt something, but the reality of the matter was that Hannibal had decided that it was important for them to interact as a normal family would and absolute privacy was needed for that.

“I did,” he assured her, feeling himself ease into the role of fatherhood—it was still an exotic mindset to enter and he watched both of the Lecters religiously to make sure he was following the script of what they expected from him.

As they entered the kitchen, she removed herself from his hold to sit at the counter. “Daddy’s in the Situation Room this morning.”

“I can make breakfast,” Will said eagerly. “I’m pretty sure your dad had sausage links in the fridge.”

“They’re Italian,” she warned him as he went over to the fridge.

“Uh, okay. Any ham? Yes, there’s ham.” He pulled out a few different ingredients, pretending to
know what he was doing. “You seem to be running low on meat. Want me to call up the shopper to have them buy some?”

“No, we only eat what we hunt. We’re already scheduling to pick some up the next time we go to Boring.”

“Did you stock up before the 2012 campaign?”

She shrugged slightly. “Yeah, last fall we only shot a deer while we went hunting up in New York.”

“Well, what else do you hunt?” Will thought about the photo of Abigail standing over a large buck with her rifle in hand.

“Oh, like, you know, wild pigs, rabbits, that kind of thing.” Her hand grabbed a funny orangish fruit out of the bowl on the counter and she turned it in her hands, studying it. “We’ll just have to go hunting again this fall and stock up.”

As he decided on making scrambled eggs with diced ham and bell peppers, he exhaled shallowly and put forward a suggestion he wasn’t entirely sure about. “Maybe…I should learn how to shoot. Take some target practice lessons.”

“You’d…” She nearly dropped the fruit she was holding, her eyes wide. “You’d want to learn how to hunt?”

“Seems to be a family tradition.” He tried to keep his eyes lowered to the cutting board, but her gaze was so magnetic he couldn’t help but stare back.

Her eyes were too white.

“It’s very important to us.”

Bolstered by his desire to be family, to prove himself, he smiled with all the confidence he had. “Then it’s important to me.”

*****

{In ten minutes I will be taking a break from the meeting. Please bring a refill of tea.}

Will stood up from his desk as he typed a reply to the President. {Anything else?}

{No, that will be all. Thank you.}

Hurrying out of his office and locking the door behind him, he quickly texted the head of the White House Ushers to have someone turn on the electric kettle in the Residence’s kitchen to get the water hot enough to seep the tea. Slipping the BlackBerry back into his back pocket, he cut through the Oval Office and across the portico to the Palm Room, nodding and mumbling polite hellos to the Marines that opened the doors for him. By the time he reached the kitchen, the kettle had almost heated the water enough to add the tea; he hummed a tune that he hoped vaguely sounded like it was from the concert he’d attended with the First Family. Sometimes he wondered if Hannibal could taste a difference in his food and drinks if finer music was played and as he hummed over the honey he found in the pantry, he liked to believe he could.

Hannibal had spent hours today in the War Room, dealing with whatever was going on in the Middle East; Will was vaguely aware of certain details—weapons on both sides of the fight were escalating in level of destruction, there was suspicion on what countries were secretly sneaking in aid
to the Assad government, where people were trying to seek refuge—but he didn’t press for any information and Hannibal gave him none. There was something unspoken about not bringing war into their private lives and Will was unsure if this was because of his empathy or because of Hannibal’s past, but he was grateful that it wasn’t a topic he had to concern himself with.

Will arrived back in the West Wing with the back up thermos of tea, carrying the ceramic vessel carefully as he walked down the steps to the War Room. It appeared he arrived early and as he stood outside the locked door, he gave a polite nod to the man seated at the checkpoint; he was spared any small talk when the door to the War Room opened and as the other occupants filed down the hallway to the cafeteria, Hannibal ushered him off to the side and accepted the new container of tea, handing Will the empty one.

“I have five minutes, Will. What would you like to talk about?”

Will wondered what it was in his face that indicated something was on his mind—Hannibal always seemed to read him so well. “Well, I think we should…” he took a deep breath. “Hannibal, I've been thinking. Uh, if I'm going to spend more time with...here, It's not fair for me to leave the dogs at home alone.”

He needed Hannibal to read between the lines and thankfully, he did. “You would like to place them in new homes.”

Will nodded, relieved to be understood and that he didn’t have to say it himself. “If you know anyone who is interested. And I'd have to approve them first.”

“Of course.”

“And Abigail gets first pick,” he added.

Hannibal smiled slightly. “To make your pack into our pack.”

“I...I can...” Will straightened his shoulders and almost made eye contact. “We can bring her over this weekend for dinner—I can order takeout—and we'll let her decide.”

“Inform her of your plans. We can discuss the rest tonight.”

Will nodded and decided it was time to switch subjects. “Everything going okay in there?”

“As well as war can go.”

“Need anything else? Uh, aspirin for the headaches your cabinet is giving you?” He knew it was a lame thing to tease about, but he hoped that he at least could lighten the mood slightly.

“None yet.” When Will reached to the pocket that held his painkillers, Hannibal held out a hand to stop him. “A joke, my dear Will.”

Will looked over to the room off-limits to him. “Looks like you need to go.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t...let it stress you out.”

“I won’t.”

“Text me if you need anything else. Uh, even a quick escape,” he offered, completely serious.
“I shall.”

And with that, Hannibal was whisked back into the War Room, leaving Will by himself in the hallway as he moved out of the way for staffers headed down to the cafeteria. Will was getting better at texting and walking at the same time and quickly pulled out his BlackBerry; Abigail’s number was almost at the top of the recent messages and he promptly typed out,

{Your dad said yes. You can have a dog.}

As he hurried up the steps to the main floor of the West Wing, side stepping a group of the Vice President’s aides when she replied. {Thank you thank you than kyou!!!}

*****

“Hi, Winston,” Abigail greeted that Saturday evening as she knelt down in front of the shy dog wagging his tail. Her father was with Will in the kitchen and she could hear them strategising the lattice crust on the apple pie they wanted to make for dessert. From the living room, she could see them standing side by side at the cheap linoleum counter, Will’s head bowed slightly as he watched her father demonstrating the proper way to lay out the strips of pastry.

Winston stepped forward and brought his wet nose against her chin to get her attention; she patted his head as she pulled a brand new leather collar out of her back pocket. The metal name plate on the side (her father hadn’t wanted the jingling noise of hanging tags) was engraved with his name and ‘1600 Pennsylvania Ave’ beneath that; removing the blue nylon collar, she placed the new one on, buckling and making sure two fingers could comfortable slip between his fur and the leather. Satisfied, she touched her own collar—a silk scarf her father had bought for her one spring on a whim—and smiled at how wonderful her life was coming together. Two parents, a dog, a white house, and apple pie. She had the American dream.

*****

A Tattle-Politics EXCLUSIVE!!!

Meet Winston, the First Family’s new dog! The lovely mutt is a rescue from none other than the President’s right hand man, Will Graham. A source within the White House has informed yours truly that Mr Graham has a habit of finding strays and rehabilitating them to make up for a lack of friends.

In honour of the new family member, the Lecters are making a donation to the Washington Humane Society.

A poll on Tattle-Politics back in February had only 2% voting for a mixed breed dog. Yikes! Let’s try to study our politicians a little better next time, shall we?

What do you think of the new First Dog, Tattlers?

*****

Hannibal sat in the Situation Room for the eighth straight day, hands folded neatly in front of him on the table. He’d just finished his third thermos of tea; Will kept adding a small amount of honey to the drink and while he appreciated the consideration, he didn’t need things sweetened for him. He’d
really have to talk to him about that. Dear, sweet boy.

However, where he had infinite patience for Will, he was exhausted of the discussion that had become dragged out for the week and he’d already decided that he was going to draw the matter to a close today, no further arguments allowed. Syria had gone from a thorn in his side to a wound that was threatening to fester; soon he’d be forced into a position of speaking to the American people about his stance on the matter. It was moments such as these that made him hate the career he’d chosen. Lecters weren’t meant to answer to anyone.

There had been obvious sarin gas attacks within the Ghouta region, Damascus countryside—any doctor could see that—but as was expected from people who’d played politics for too long, half of the war cabinet sitting around the conference table was quick to say, “Well, we have to speculate. We don’t have any proof yet.”

“I will not stand for what is happening in Syria,” he said simply after the slide show of horrific images came to an end and the lights in the room turned back on. “We will put a stop to this immediately.”

One of the men who’d been trying his patience was the Combatant Commander for United States Central Command, the section of the Department of Defense that was responsible for military presence in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. They’d been at odds the entirety of the past eight days and he was prone to dramatic remarks for shock value. “Mr President, you’ll have to forgive my frankness, but you were never a soldier.”

Hannibal met the General’s gaze with one that was unreservedly icy; he didn’t care if the man had four stars on his ranking—he still answered to him and if he thought Hannibal was the type of man to be swayed by ‘frankness’, he was completely wrong.

“No, I was not. I was always the one the soldiers failed to protect,” Hannibal informed him a very clipped tone. “When I was a child, I saw the cruelty extended by governments that sought to destroy democracy. I have lived through what you never seem able to prevent.”

The room went still, everyone watching uncomfortably because while his past was known by everyone, it was something he almost never discussed publicly.

“When I was serving as a surgeon for Médecins Sans Frontières in Bosnia, I watched a government begin to execute its own people—children and adults alike. There was no mercy shown. I saw my patients being raped, infants having their throats slit, young men being dragged out of bed in the middle of the night to be found the following morning with execution shots to the head. Those that feared the torture and death awaiting them often committed suicide. The Dutch peacekeepers stood by and did nothing. We were doctors and there was nothing we could do.” He straightened the stack of briefings before him. “Sarin gas causes death for the fortunate and a lifetime of permanent neurological damage for the rest. I have seen victims of this type of attack first hand. I will not sit by idly as it continues. We must take action. There is a standard that the UN has set regarding chemical weapons and if we must be the ones to enforce it, we shall.”

Clinton was quick to calm the situation. “Give us time, Mr President. I want to resolve this with as little involvement as possible.”

His eyes darted to her and he nodded slightly, accepting her request. It would not do for him to look bloodthirsty, despite having no qualms about completely annihilating a country so he didn’t have to
deal with it any longer. “I agree that would be the best course of action. If Syria wishes to continue
down this path of self-destruction, then it is our responsibility to save those that are unable to put an
end to this madness. I will not tolerate unnecessary suffering.” He stood from the table which forced
the others seated around him to stand abruptly as well. “I have other work to attend to. We will
reconvene when Madame Secretary has reached a solution.”

From the expressions and body language of the others, there was no doubt in his mind that his
decision to end the meeting was not popular, but with his drawn back shoulders and piercing gaze,
no one had the nerve to stop him. Even Jack looked uneasy, which was good as he was becoming
too familiar with Hannibal and that needed to be corrected.

He excused himself from the room and decided that he was going to block off the next hour to
bending Will over the arm chair in Will’s office, keeping him gagged with one of his spare ties. He
felt himself begin to relax as he considered which would look better soaked in the younger man’s
saliva—cobalt green or goldenrod.

*****

The rest of the day maintained the uncomfortable atmosphere and he was aware that his mood was
rubbing off on the people around him, though he found that acceptable as he didn’t want to deal with
the roving employees that only knew how to simper when he walked by. He would much rather
surround himself with the two people who would drown themselves in his disquiet, trying to rescue
him. From his desk he watched Will sit down gingerly on the sofa and Hannibal fought back a smirk;
he’d been a touch too rough with the boy, but such was life—Will hadn’t complained after all.
Abigail had ended her work day early and appeared to be loitering in his office, drifting around
behind his desk as he worked on reports he’d been taken from as he dealt with the crisis in Syria.

“Marissa was supposed to graduate last week.” Abigail touched the frame of the photo from her own
graduation from Sidwell Friends.

“Yes,” he agreed as he kept his eyes on the briefing in his hands, aware that Will was looking at her
mournfully, feeling her pain. If she wanted sympathy for Marissa, she could turn to him for it—
Hannibal had no intention of feigning guilt over her friend’s death. And it would do well for Will to
assume this part of his paternal role, consoling their child with the sympathy he couldn’t help but
feel. Hannibal found it almost poetic.

“I want to plant a rose bush for her in the garden,” Abigail continued, attempting to get a reaction
from him.

“That would be a lovely sentiment. Will, why don’t you and Abigail go to the flower department and
decide which rose would be most suiting to plant in honour of Miss Schurr’s memory? We can have
a matching plant sent to Sidwell’s to be planted there as well.”

His own disinterest in the matter would be attributed to the problems with Syria, which worked to his
own benefit, because right now he was only interested in misleading Will.

And Will seemed to believe that, motioning to the young woman. “Come on, Abigail.”

As his family walked out of the room, the obedient Winston trailing after them, Hannibal called out,
“We shall have tea at three-thirty.”

“Ohkay,” Abigail responded, linking her hand into the bend of Will’s elbow. She didn’t look at him.
Hannibal watched them both leave the office and quickly decided upon how he would mark the
event of the rose planting, which Abigail would no doubt put ceremony into. Perhaps he could have
Will find something appropriate to say. He’d wear his pink shirt and a light blue tie, and he’d try to
convince Abigail into a rich plum and not a dour black. Hannibal smiled and returned his attention
back to the briefing in his hands.

*****

“And cut.”

The bright light on Hannibal’s face was turned off and he leaned back slightly in his chair behind the
desk. It was a Friday evening and he was delivering his first Oval Office Address, a speech that held
in what was considered a solemn setting. He’d announced his intentions for Syria—“At the end of
September, should the Assad regime choose not to surrender their chemical weapons to the
Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the United Nations for immediate
destruction and further inspection, I will issue an order for United States Military force to be used to
remove those chemical weapons.”—everything carefully worded so that he could simultaneously
regretful of the decision while still sounding as though they as a nation had no other choice. They
actually had many choices as a nation, but this was the one Hannibal wanted most.

“Five minutes until the Spanish speech, President Lecter,” Bella Crawford informed him as she
listened to the earpiece that kept her in contact with the various media departments in the White
House.

He nodded and allowed the cosmetologist who’d hurried over to quickly dust translucent powder
across his face, while Will came around the edges of the camera equipment to hand him his glass of
water. As he drank it, he glanced up at the younger man; he hadn’t spoken about Syria to Will
because he had no interest in Will emphasising with anything happening on the ground. He’d already
made his decision on how to handle the country back in May and he didn’t want to deal with Will
trying to make him change his mind—Will couldn’t change his mind. Bedelia was sitting back on the
sofa, maintaining a direct eye contact with him—“Hannibal, who cares? Let them implode and we’ll
send relief to the survivors.”—and Jack was standing patiently by the doors leading to the portico
—“Hannibal, why don’t we let the speech writers have a go at this one? Because sometimes you
sound…a little aggressive about these things. No? Are you sure?”—while Abigail stood behind the
speech prompter—“Can they strike back against us if you authorise drone strikes? Oh, then I think
it’s a great idea.”—and his eyes brought him back to Will.

“Why don’t you take Abigail upstairs? I’m sure she would enjoy watching the speech on Univisión,”
Hannibal suggested.

Will’s brow knotted further. “Are you sure?”

“I will be up in an hour. Jack can get me anything I need until then.”

“Right.” The younger man looked as though he wanted to argue, but thought better of it. “Okay,
I’ll…okay.”

Hannibal was careful not allow their fingers to brush, despite the urge to; there were too many people
in the room and it was too much of a risk to take. His eyes followed Will around the room to collect
Abigail, noting as his speech prompter switched over from the English language speech to the
Spanish speech. As the two left the Oval Office, he returned his attention to the necessary demeanor
for the room; he was stoic and allowed himself to look a bit sadder, as though this was something
that weighed very heavy on his conscious.

When he was finally released from the clutches of the Crawfords and his cousin, it was an hour later
than he’d anticipated and he wondered how anxious that had left Will. He texted Abigail that he was returning and she replied promptly that she’d decided to go bed, that she loved him, and that Will had been last spotted searching the kitchen for alcohol. He smiled and sent her an appreciative, *Thank you, my love. Sleep well.*, and then gave brief orders to Secret Service that he was retiring for the night, which meant he wanted absolutely no one upstairs—including Jack. Winston was no where in sight, indicating he was most likely with Abigail, and as he walked from the elevator to the dark living room, he found Will leaning against the windows and looking out at the back lawn. Will’s tie had been loosened and he stood in the relaxed way that indicated he’d been drinking, which was a relief to Hannibal. Inebriation always made someone more pliant to his will and the younger man was definitely no exception. He came to stand beside Will and watched the man’s barely illuminated profile.

“I sent Abigail to bed. Thought she should get some sleep.” Will glanced over at him out of the corner of his eye. “How are you?”

“Stay.” The word was unnecessary—Will wouldn’t leave him when he thought he as distressed.

He allowed Will to pull him into his arms, allowed him to pull him to the bedroom, allowed him to lock the door.

“Tell me what you want, baby,” Will murmured against his lips, breath tasting of Alana’s beer, hands stroking his arms and back roughly as though Hannibal was one of his strays that needed to be overwhelmed with touch.

It was amusing to think that Will thought himself capable of soothing Hannibal, so he indulged the other man, making himself smaller in his arms and whispered in the most helpless tone possible, “Take my mind off things.”

Will’s actions became more dominant and Hannibal wondered what else he could coax out of the younger man; he always looked at Hannibal as though he was truly something worth treasuring, which was exactly what he thought of Will. They kissed hungrily and he felt Will reach into his trouser pocket before pulling out his BlackBerry, pulling away long enough press a few buttons.

Will kissed him softly on the lips. “I’m going to turn off your phone. If Jack needs you, he can call me.”

“Are you sure?” It was becoming difficult for Hannibal to keep a straight face—Will was simply too sweet to him.

“Yeah, don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.” Will’s smile was so earnest and honest and Hannibal kissed him in something that resembled relief.

He fell back on the bed and while he hated the thought of having his clothing wrinkled and tugged at, ending up on the floor as Will did a sloppy job of undressing him, he allowed it to happen. The clothing could be cleaned and pressed, after all. His phone slid off onto the floor and Will knelt between Hannibal’s legs as he pressed kisses across the skin he was exposing, dropping the clothes over the side of bed before having Hannibal lie in the centre. Oral sex seemed to be Will’s fall back position—Hannibal smirked at the pun—when he was at a loss for what to do with Hannibal’s emotions. His hands played with the feathery, tousled curls of Will’s hair and sighed softly, closing his eyes.

“I love you,” he whispered and Will’s hands held to his hips tighter, massaging deep circles into his skin.
He attempted to maintain his composure, but Will’s tongue was exceptionally talented tonight, exploring new territory in his half drunken haze and he moaned softly, breath hitching where the younger man touched him.

“I love you,” Will whispered back, lips wet and eyes bright in the dark.

Hannibal sank back against the mattress and down pillows as Will pulled his thighs up over his shoulders.

*****

Will stayed over on Saturday night as well, giving a very quiet admission as they lie in bed together that he wanted to make sure Hannibal wasn’t overwhelmed by the heavy decisions weighing on his mind. Hannibal hadn’t answered, merely pulled his lover closer and pressed gentle kisses to Will’s shoulders. On Sunday morning before he and Abigail were to leave for Mass, he stood in the kitchen, watching as Will folded an omelet. His cooking skills had been improving little by little, though Hannibal would never fully trust him in the kitchen by himself.

“Will, before you leave, there is food waiting for you in the refrigerator.” He returned his attention to the plates he’d been warming in the oven.

“While I certainly enjoy your company, I have to admit that half the fun of going home during the weekdays is that I get to bring your cooking home with me and none of the etiquette,” Will informed him mischievously.

Affectionately, Hannibal smoothed an errant lock of hair from Will’s face. “You would starve without me, wouldn’t you?”

Will’s cheeks turned pink. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

Hannibal’s smile became even more smug and Will’s blush deepened, his lips twitching into an annoyed smile.

“Oh, you’re right. Hannibal, the world’s greatest leader is keeping poor Will Graham from wasting away to nothing.”

Hannibal responded by squeezing the side of Will’s stomach, noting how solid it felt compared to the first time he’d touched him. “You’ve put on weight since we first met. More muscle. It is a sign you’re eating better.”

“Then you must be very proud of yourself.”

“I am.” Hannibal was.

“And so modest,” Will teased. “How did I get so lucky?”

Hannibal was willing to let the food overcook for the sake of stealing another kiss and reinforcing the importance of their relationship. “You and I shall forever be drawn to one another, Will. It is our fate.”

Will linked his fingers with his and Hannibal relished the feeling of the other man’s callouses. “Forever?”

“Of that I am most certain.”
But nothing could remain good forever.

****

It was the end of September and it was still hot in DC; Will wanted the cold weather of winter to return so that he could live without the discomfort of sweating. He’d just completed his first year’s worth of antibiotics for the encephalitis and Hannibal was celebrating with a decadent breakfast—stacks of crepes, an assortment of freshly syrups and spreads, a fresh melange of fruit, and thick bacon frying in a pan; Will stared at it longingly, wondering if all wild pig meat looked like that. Certainly better than the store bought bacons and hams, anyway.

He usually tried to stay out of Hannibal’s way while he was working in the kitchen, but this particular morning had him leant back against the counter as Hannibal alternated between keeping his attention on the bacon and feeding Will slices of orange. Will felt spoilt, though he’d never admit it.

“Will, tonight I would like for you to attend dinner with Abigail and I.”

“I thought…” he frowned. “You want me there while Chilton’s there?”

“Yes.”

“Emotional support?” Will asked drily.

Hannibal would never admit it, but Will was certain he smirked. “Yes, and I thought, ‘Who better than Will Graham to offer emotional support?’” Will averted his eyes, embarrassed; Hannibal took the opportunity to continue. “Rather, I wished to see what you thought of President Chilton. A perfect opportunity to study him in a controlled setting.”

“Right.” His nose wrinkled in distaste. “What am I supposed to gain from the experience?”

“Whatever you wish to gain, my dear Will.” Hannibal’s hand came to rest on Will’s back momentarily as he moved around him to start the coffee. “And while it is short notice, perhaps you could stay afterwards?”

Will bit his lower lip and coyly replied. “I might be able to schedule that in, President Lecter.”

Their conversation was cut short as Abigail entered the room and both men automatically turned their attention to her instead.

****

“What happened to the apron that said, ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’, Abigail?” Hannibal asked as Will and Abigail milled around the kitchen during dinner preparation. They were in his way, but he couldn’t deny their audience, and was forced to work around them as they assumed they were helping.

Abigail paused as she grated the rind off an orange. “I don’t remember where I packed it.”

Will made a face as he placed quartered tomatoes in the food processor. “You’re not going to wear it, are you?”
“No, I thought you might. You are soon to get the front of that shirt dirty if you continue working in that manner.”

Will’s face became red, just as embarrassed as Hannibal had hoped for, which would discourage him from remaining in the kitchen much longer. “I’ll make myself useful somewhere else.”

He proceeded to stir at the sauce on the stove top, then investigated the large squares of parchment paper that Hannibal had set out for the origami he’d be making later. Had he not been in love, Hannibal might have felt anger at the way Will couldn’t be useful by simply keeping him company.

“Why don’t you and Abigail entertain yourself in the living room?” Hannibal finally suggested when it was apparent Will was much more comfortable getting under foot than actually staying out of his way.

“Are you throwing us out?” Will asked, frowning slightly, his lips quirking as though he wasn’t certain if he was supposed to laugh or not.

“I was trying to be polite about it,” Hannibal admitted, smiling at the younger man.

“We could finish that fly we were working on,” their daughter suggested before Will could become offended.

“Might be, uh, easier,” he said hesitantly, eyes hidden behind his glasses.

Hannibal reached out and trailed a finger along the younger man’s forearm as he walked past, a calculated gesture of affection to reassure Will there was no rejection underlying his wish that he leave and Will relaxed slightly as he followed Abigail out of the room. Returning his attention to the meat braising in the pan, Hannibal’s eyes immediately locked onto the piece of Miriam that was tenderising. It seemed even when he’d put an effective ban on Secret Service agents in his kitchen, there was always the one who refused to follow his rules.

He smiled to himself at the joke and added a bit more wine to the reduction.

*****

Former President Frederick Chilton, Forty-Fifth President of the United States of America, was a man that held himself in high regards, believing himself only deserving of keeping company with those that had a recogniseable name were politically elite. Even though he’d been bested in November 2012 by Hannibal in a large margin, he was willing to overlook his grudge to attend dinner with him to have his name in the press again. The dinner had originally been scheduled for July, but Chilton had postponed it to September in order to attend a banking conference in the Cayman Islands with President Bush, the forty-third President. It was common for the newly elected to share a meal with the opponent who’d lost to them and was usually a tense and uncomfortable event.

Will had very possessively not wanted Chilton anywhere near the First Family—his family—but he knew that Hannibal would think it rude to delay the inevitable and so he put up no protest or series of excuses to get them out of the ordeal. Winston was being kept downstairs in the Secret Service’s office as Chilton had allergies to pet dander, which meant Will didn’t even have the company of that familiar friend to act as a buffer. As they stood in the Center Hall awaiting his entrance, Hannibal smiled at him reassuringly; there wasn’t much he could do to seek last minute comfort with a White House photographer present, so he was forced to stand and hope to channel some of the President’s ease for himself. Chilton arrived with his own entourage of assistant and agents, dressed in a fawn coloured jacket, eyes scanning the hallway, no doubt taking in the many changes since he’d lived
there nine months previous.

“Frederick, it’s a pleasure to see you again.” Hannibal extended his hand amicably, the White House photographer quickly capturing the moment before being ushered away by Agent Price.

Chilton’s smile was the same false smirk he wore constantly. “Hannibal, it’s nice to be back.”

Hannibal ignored the territorial remark. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Been enjoying the downtime. And yourself?”

“I’m well, thank you.” Hannibal gestured to Will. “Frederick, this is Mr Will Graham, my personal assistant.”

“Yes, there’s a lot of talk about you,” the other man said as he leaned in to shake Will’s hand. “Lot of people wanting to study you.”

Will felt his skin crawl at the interest Chilton had in him; he’d almost forgotten what it was like to be under the scrutinizing eyes of politicos wanting to pick his brain apart as though he was a grand divining tool that could bring the world to their feet. He pulled his hand back and straightened his jacket, an unconscious habit that Hannibal often did when upset.

Chilton’s expression changed minutely as it dawned on him why the President’s assistant was being introduced. “Oh, you’re joining us tonight, too? I didn’t realise this wouldn’t be private.” His smile be

“Not relegated to the kiddies’ table tonight, I’m afraid.” Will knew it was stupid to insult Hannibal’s guest, but he couldn’t bite his tongue.

“Well, the more the merrier.” He looked past Will to the young woman who’d entered the hall from the dining room. “Abigail, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“I’m so glad you could finally come over for dinner, President Chilton,” she said, offering a pleasant smile and her hand for him to shake.

Chilton glanced around the Center Hall. “I love what you’ve done with the place. Very elegant. You have a very refined touch.”

“I’m afraid I can’t take all the credit,” she admitted and then gestured to the doorway. “May I give you a tour? We just rotated in the new art.”

Chilton offered out his arm to her and she took it; Will could see she was slipping into a role meant to mimic the one she showed during television interviews. It was a guarded version of herself, only a smiling face and patience for stupid or tactless questions—she was steeling herself for something she didn’t want to do, but would simply because she was expected to, fulfilling her role as lady of the house. Will nearly followed after them, but Hannibal’s hand found his wrist, leading him to the kitchen.

“I don’t want her alone with him,” Will hissed to Hannibal.

It had been mentioned briefly that Abigail’s current agent, Barney Matthews, had been reassigned for the night because of a ‘personality difference’ between himself and the former President, whose personal detail he’d been on and Beverly had made a quick mention that Chilton may have been part of the reason Matthews had nearly retired the previous year. It had set off a thousand red flags in Will’s mind—if anyone’s judgement could be trusted, it was the seasoned agent.
Hannibal gave him an amused look as though he felt Will was overreacting to the situation entirely. “Agent Zeller is with them. Should Frederick try anything with her, he will have to deal with them both.” He began to fold one of the large parchment papers on the countertop, forming crisp lines that he pressed in place with the edge of a knife handle. “And Abigail will tell us if anything happens.”

“He’s a pig.”

“A stupid one. But we shall worry about the meat later.” Hannibal leant across the counter and as though it was the most natural thing in the world, Will leaned in as well, kissing him. When they pulled away, Hannibal was grinning—wolfish and cruel.

Perhaps in another life they weren’t hosting assholes like Chilton for dinner; perhaps in another life they were married, not having to hide themselves from others around them. But what they had here in this moment wasn’t without its pleasure. He stole another kiss from the older man and then took the wine Hannibal had selected for the night out of the fridge to place it in the ice bucket that was waiting to keep the bottle chilled. Chilton would probably shit himself if he learned his successor was in a relationship with a man—he’d campaigned pretty hard with the Republican standby of having no balls to discuss equality issues; his prejudice was apparent in his refusal to take action.

Abigail and Chilton returned from their tour of the Residence after ten minutes, both laughing cheerfully. Chilton seemed to be dragging out a joke and when she looked at Will, she gave him a strained look, but her pleasantries immediately returned. “Let me show you to the table, President Chilton.”

Will carried the wine and bucket into the dining room after them, setting the silver down on the stand beside Hannibal’s chair; he then pretended to busy himself with an imaginary smudge on the spoon at the President’s place setting.

“One of the better ones in our collection,” Abigail declared as she removed the cork and began to pour Chilton a glass.

“You drink?” Chilton asked as she poured wine into her own.

“A bit at dinner. Only what’s been paired with the food.”

“How European of your father.”

Will returned to the kitchen with his fists clenched and jaw tight, planting his hands firmly on the counter and stared into the sink, trying to force himself to relax. It was unbearable to him that Chilton, with all his false niceties and arrogance, was the reason Abigail was putting on a happy face; it was a position she was already forced into because of her dad’s job—she shouldn’t have to wear it behind closed doors.

“You’re going to make yourself sick. Relax,” Hannibal murmured in his ear and Will gave an exasperated sigh. “If you’re upset he’s talking to her, then take his attention for yourself.”

“You don’t want help?” he asked softly, wanting to lean into the other man’s hold.

“I can manage without you—“

Hannibal was cut off by a loud laugh from Chilton and Will let out a low growl, turning abruptly and walking out of the kitchen. Abigail was sitting across from the former President and Will took his seat at the foot of the table. Abigail’s eyes were sly.

“Can I pour for you, Will?” She held up the bottle of wine.
“Thank you,” he murmured as he stared down the interloper at his family’s table.

Chilton stared at Will for a moment, sizing him up before turning his attention back to the young woman. “And how are you finding your title, Abigail?”

Abigail returned the bottle back to the ice bucket. “First Lady McCain did a wonderful job and left me with a very organised system to work with. Thank you for having her stay.”

“Yes, I was quite fortunate she understood the political necessity of having a First Lady in my administration.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “Abigail is quite the First Lady, wouldn’t you say?” Chilton announced to the room, trying to force Will to talk.

“She has truly lived up to the title, though I think she has potential for even better things,” Will replied snippily before reaching for his wine.

“Thank you, Will,” Abigail said and gave him a shy smile. “I’ve actually been looking into your alma mater. Considering going into politics.”

“Like your old man?” Chilton asked, drawing Abigail’s attention back to him.

“Something like that,” she replied, the toe of her shoe bumping against Will’s loafer.

Hannibal made his grand entrance with the food seven long minutes later with the first plate which was served to Chilton, then returned to the kitchen with the three remaining plates, circling the table to set them for Abigail, Will, and finally himself.

“Inspired by Auguste Escoffier, we are having Long Tangyuan en papillotte, served with a sauce of duxelles and oyster mushrooms,” he announced as he sat down at the head of the table.

“One of my father’s best recipes,” Abigail promised. “He’s very skilled with lamb meat.”

Hannibal spoke cheerfully. “It was a particularly chatty lamb.”

“The Romans used to kill flamingos just to eat their tongues,” Chilton said informatively and Will nearly rolled his eyes.

No one applauded the other man’s attempt to educated, but Hannibal did smile as everyone placed their napkins in their laps. “Don’t give me ideas. Your tongue is very feisty.” His eyes slid over to Chilton, a malicious gleam in his eyes. “And as this evening has already proven, it’s nice to have an old friend for dinner.”

Abigail and Chilton laughed pleasantly as they began to cut the meat upon their plates, but Will merely frowned, staring openly at Hannibal, who stared at him in return. It was possibly the oddest thing he’d ever heard anyone say, let alone Hannibal. Who the fuck said stuff like that? It was weird, not even a funny joke, more of a veiled threat of cannibalism. And Chilton was not an ‘old friend’ by the standards of anyone at this table, that was for sure. Why make the reference?

It was so tasteless for Hannibal, only funny if they were actually eating people.

*Your tongue is very feisty. Don’t give me ideas. It’s nice to have an old friend for dinner.*

*Don’t give me ideas. It’s nice to have an old friend for dinner. Your tongue is very feisty.*

*He’s a pig.*

*A stupid one. But we shall worry about the meat later.*
It’s nice to have an old friend for dinner.

I transferred my passion for anatomy into the culinary arts.

Your tongue—

Will couldn’t raise the forkful of meat to his mouth any further. Perhaps something in his face changed, but as the man sitting across from him looked at his face, Will knew that he knew. Hannibal could see. A thousand things, a million pieces all fit together painfully. The oysters. The interest in the Chesapeake Ripper. The symphony player and—Will inhaled sharply—and the way Hannibal had touched him afterwards. It was all there. It had been there the whole time.

“What are we eating?” Will asked, his voice emotionless.

Hannibal glanced down at the food on their plates. “Lamb.”

“Right,” he said with an uncomfortable laugh. “The screaming kind?”

Chilton eyebrows shot up. “Screaming?”

“Lambs scream when they’re being slaughtered, President Chilton,” Abigail enlightened.

“I was completely unaware.” Chilton turned to Will and said haughtily, “I believe Hannibal said the lamb was ‘chatty’.”

“Will? Are you all right?” Abigail asked.

_The Chesapeake Ripper is two people. A pair._

“Are you the type of person who’s too good to eat veal or other baby animals?” Chilton’s lips lifted in a slight sneer before turning to Hannibal. “It tastes delicious.”

But Hannibal wasn’t looking at his predecessor. “Will.”

“I…” A scream for help was lodged under his chin.

“Why don’t you try a bite before rushing to judgement, Will?” Hannibal suggested and because Will knew that refusal would be irresponsible and rude, he brought the fork to his mouth and brought the piece of tongue to rest on his own.

Hannibal’s smile caused the corners of his eyes to crinkle. “Good?”

Will spent the rest of the meal numbly, pushing his fork against the delicate paper petals of the lotus and chewing the same bite of the tongue over and over until it was flavourless and heavy in his mouth. Just as the other three at the table were finishing their dinners, a small knock on the dining room doors interrupted the conversation Chilton had started about the Great Wall of China and the doors opened; Chilton’s assistant motioned to him, holding up a cellphone with an apologetic look on his face.

Chilton frowned and then stood. “I’m sorry. Do you mind if I just step out into the hallway?”

Hannibal nodded. “Not at all.”

Chilton walked to his assistant and disappeared out the dining room doors, which were immediately closed behind him. The Lecter’s eyes turned towards him, pinning him with stares that didn’t blink. How had he never noticed that? That they stared at what made them hungry?
Hannibal was the one to break the silence and while his voice was gentle, what he said was nothing less than a command.

“Swallow.”

Without hesitation, Will did as he was told, and he closed his eyes, unsure if he was relieved that the piece of meat was no longer in his mouth or horrified that it was now inside his stomach. His fork dropped from his hand, clanging against the plate sharply, his breath shaking.

“I don’t believe our guest should stay any longer than another hour, Will. Can you stay for that long?” Hannibal asked.

Will opened his eyes, appalled at the audacity Hannibal had to suggest that Chilton was the source of the tension in the room and not what was on their plates. Abigail was watching him in hesitant curiosity, still not understanding the unspoken realisation that he’d come to.

Hannibal started to repeat his question. “Can you sta—“

“Yes, I can fucking do it,” Will snapped.

*The tenderest part of the chicken is the oysters, here on the outer side of the back.*

Abigail’s eyes were wide and horrified at his language and she started to open her mouth, but Hannibal cut her off with a kind, “Finish your dinner, Abigail, or you can’t have dessert.”

Obediently she did as she was told and as she finished the last bite of meat, Hannibal stood, clearing the table of the dinner plates, Will’s being held individually from the stack of china and forks.

“Will, would you like to assist me with dessert?” the older man asked, tone still respectful.

No, he didn’t, but he stood anyway, following after the other man; it felt like a death march and he was prepared to go with a fight. The plates were set in the sink, the rinsing skipped, and Hannibal turned to him. Will tensed and for a moment when Hannibal reached out, Will’s hands tensed into fists and he realised the knife block was too far away to get to.

“You are usually so keen to request seconds. Are you feeling all right, Will?” The cupping palm of Hannibal’s hand came to rest lightly against Will’s cheek before moving up to his forehead, stroking his thumb against Will’s brow. “You are no warmer than usual.”

Ownership was demonstrated by the act of touching—people didn’t, as a rule, touch things that didn’t belong to them—not with cherishing regard. Not with soft strokes and tenderness, without the cruelty of the outside world. He flinched as a second hand came to touch his elbow. Abigail. She looked like a human, a beautiful daughter he never dreamt of having for his own.

“Do you want dessert?” she asked. “I can make you something.”

Hannibal’s hand finally withdrew from Will. “Sugar might not be the best thing for him if he’s not feeling well, Abigail.”

There was a noise behind them at Chilton entering the kitchen. “Everything fine?” He glanced over Will without hiding his distaste. “You’re not coming down with anything, are you, Graham?”

“I’d…” Will wasn’t speaking to the former president, looking instead at the two beautiful creatures that had him surrounded. “I’d like some more wine, please.”
“Certainly, Will.” Hannibal left the kitchen to retrieve Will’s glass and the bottle.

“Is your stomach upset? I can get you some crackers,” Abigail offered, smiling hopefully to him.

“Let’s just get this over with.” Will pressed the words out quietly through clenched teeth.

Chilton asked a bit louder, “Is he sick?”

“He’s been working late recently. I believe his lack of sleep is catching up to him.” Will glared at Hannibal for the lie, finding it unbearably rude to have to explain anything to Chilton of all people. Hannibal seemed unaffected by the look and set the glass he’d poured onto the counter. “Will, your wine.”

Will pushed the glass away, unable to look at it. He didn’t want anything that would taste good with tongue.

“I want something white,” he croaked out.

“As you wish.”

As Hannibal went to the refrigerator, Will could still sense Abigail standing close, unsure where she fit into the situation.

“Bit of a waste,” Chilton commented, eyeing the wine.

“What kind of host would I be if I didn’t accommodate my guests?” Hannibal said cordially.

“Anything in particular, Will? I have an excellent Viognier that tastes quite peachy—“

“I don’t care.” His fists were clenched at this point.

“Very well.” He gave an eased smile and motioned back to the doorway. “Why don’t you and Frederick return to the dining room? Abigail and I shall be just a moment.”

Again, Will’s body followed orders and he walked stiffly into the dining room, sitting back down in his seat. He stared straight ahead to the President’s empty chair, listening to the other man drumming his fingers on the tabletop.

“What’s wrong with you?” Chilton asked, his tone nastier as he didn’t have to keep up appearances to the Lecters. “Oh, too good to speak to me?”

“There’s not a lot to say.”

Chilton was not going to take no for an answer, however. “You know, just because we’re on different sides of the aisle, doesn’t mean we can’t talk.”

Will didn’t have the patience for Chilton’s shit as he dealt with the biggest crisis in his life and fear made him rude. “What do you want to talk about then?” He snapped. “Why I wouldn’t help you? Or what I think of your legacy?”

Chilton seemed excited that he’d goaded any kind of reaction from Will. “My, you’re a touchy one, aren’t you? You know, everyone says you’re difficult to work with. Didn’t realise it wasn’t limited to just work.”

Will made a disgusted noise. “I’ll put my deductive skills to good use and guess that what you really want from me right now is a way to repair your image so that the public doesn’t write you off completely as the biggest egotistical moron the country has ever seen. People thought Bush was bad,
but you made him look like a political genius.”

Chilton glared at him. “I don’t know how much he had to pay you to lick his ass or whatever it is you do here, but I know the GOP would pay you double to salvage the crap I inherited. Sitting in your ivory tower with the neon sign that says ‘not for sale’ and then suddenly Lecter’s pulling in polling numbers that no has since Reagan? You could have saved me a lot of humiliation and done something good—“

“You think he won because of me? Hannibal Lecter won the fucking election because he’s good at what he does.” ‘Lying!’ Will’s mind screamed. ‘He’s so good at lying!’ “I don’t work for shit-stain politicians that—“

Chilton slammed a hand down on the tabletop, hissing, “Everyone looks that way when you’re told to stand next to Hannibal Lecter! How the hell was I supposed to compete against someone who looks like him? It’s not enough that everyone was charmed by his accent and Kennedy connexions—everyone loved his story! I grew up in the fucking MidWest and he watched his parents killed and sister hacked to bits!”

“You demanded access to his family’s file.” A flood of hot anger filled Will. “Fuck you! You used your presidential powers to look into your opponent’s past? You had no right to do that!”

Chilton’s look sobered, but there was certainly fear in his eyes. “I don’t have to admit to that.”

“I would deny everything.” Hannibal had walked back into the room with a silver tray carrying three plates of dessert on it. “An autumn tart of roast figs, blackberries, cinnamon with a scoop of black currant sorbet.”

He presented the food to the former president, who looked at him uneasily, but Hannibal gave no outward signs that he was angry or even upset; Will’s first instinct to get him away from Chilton was conflicting with his images in his mind of Hannibal shoving a cello neck down the mouth and throat of a man who’d displeased him for simply not being good enough to perform in the Meyerhoff. He’d killed that man for Will.

Hannibal sat once more and looked at Will; Will could just tell that Hannibal was drinking from his former wine glass, enjoying the wine he’d poured. There was no actual outward distinction between his glass and the President’s, but he knew that he was.

‘But you didn’t really know him at all, did you?’

Disgust made his mouth taste sour.

Abigail returned from the kitchen with a small handed him a bowl of sliced strawberries that had been dusted with finely ground almonds, setting it in front of him. “Should be gentle enough for you to enjoy. Daddy used to make it for me when I had an upset stomach.” When he made no move to touch it, she added, “Please?”

Chilton rolled his eyes, taking his fork to the tart he’d been given to eat.

Abigail smiled at him, patient and encouraging. Will wondered what kind of monsters could exhibit all the symptoms of love. But there was something else in her eyes now. She knew. Hannibal had told her that he was now aware of what was happening around him.

“Just strawberries and almonds. Nothing else.”

Slighted that all eyes were on Will, Chilton spoke up. “You’re such a good host, Ab—“
“Yes, thank you,” Abigail said tightly, turning her head slightly in the direction of the former President, but never leaving eye contact with Will.

Chilton scowled at everyone in the room, but neither Lecter noticed, too busy watching for his next move. Will ignored the fork meant to accompany fruit and used his fingers to pick out the sticky slices. Abigail relaxed back into her chair and she and her dad began to eat their desserts. Chilton left not long after that; he’d become frustrated at the lack of attention and had kept his farewells curt.

When Abigail and Hannibal finished their food, they carried the dishes into the kitchen in silence, Will trailing after them. His mind felt distant from his body and it took him a moment to realise that the detachment was the influence of Hannibal. Walking over to the door, he shut it quietly, not wanting to alert the Secret Service that he was going to be saying things that he wanted only the Lecters to hear. There was a decorative flourish in the moulding by the light switch and Will pressed this thumb against it, turning off all microphone access to the room.

“We weren’t eating lamb tonight.” He watched for a reaction in the faces of the predators he stood before and found none.

“No,” Hannibal agreed. “We were having an old friend for dinner.”

“Don’t come any closer,” Will warned, his voice a low hiss as the other man took a step forward. Hannibal stopped immediately, his voice calm. “It was not my intention for you to find out tonight.”

Miriam Lass’ body was never found.

“Oh god.” Will was no longer able to maintain his composure. “When you said you were hunters, you—you—“

Abigail’s head tilted to the side as though she was waiting for him to say more. Patient. Encouraging.

Let’s no ascribe genders to our food, Abigail.

“Will, you’re hyperventilating—“ Hannibal reached out for him and Will tripped over his own ankles trying to get away from the President.

We’re fishers of men.

“Will—“

“Don’t!” His hands shot out in front of him defensively, instinct telling him to protect his head.

“Will, we’re not going to hurt you.” Hannibal knelt before him. “Will, look at me.” Will’s eyes locked onto the irises that sometimes looked almost red. “We are your family.”

“You’re eating people!” his voice came out higher, but volume restrained because even though he knew he was in danger he was held under the spell of Hannibal’s rules—yelling was not allowed.

“Will, take deep breaths—“

“You’re killing people—you’re eating—that’s Miriam Lass—“ Will turned to his left and threw up on the kitchen floor, acidic wine and chewed strawberries.

“Shhh, shhh.” Hannibal stood and went to the sink, quickly fetching a glass of water before kneeling back beside him. “Drink this. Your throat must be burning.”
Will shoved the offered hand away from him. “Get away from me! Both of you!” he scrambled against the white tile floor, pushing himself to the wall. “You’re—you killed her—“ His eyes became wide as another realisation struck him hard. “Did you do what Mason Verger said you did?”

Hannibal tilted his head. “Would that upset you?”

Will pointed a finger to Abigail. “She was a child! You dragged her into this? You were supposed to protect her!” Not that he saw her completely innocent in all this. Rounding on her, he asked, “Did you tell her why you wouldn’t let her get a dog? Or any pet?”

Abigail nodded, reciting something she’d no doubt used. “Their fur could be tracked to a crime scene—“

“He wouldn’t let you get a pet because he thought you might abuse it. Like sociopaths do.”

Will—who would die for Abigail, who would kill for Abigail, who would hide a body for her—knew that he was venturing into territory he’d never wanted to go.

Her face went from guarded to confused. “What?”

“Is that what you used to do, Hannibal? Torture animals as a child?” Will asked, goading.

At this, Hannibal looked slightly annoyed. “No.”

Will’s eyes narrowed. “No, you’re too sophisticated for that.”

The look of annoyance disappeared. “Animal suffering holds no enjoyment for me.”

Abigail looked at Hannibal; the expression of hurt felt like a dagger being driven through Will’s side. “You thought I would hurt a pet?”

Hannibal’s voice was oily and smooth, a politician’s song. “It was a precaution, my love.”

“He only let you have Winston because I fucking nagged,” Will sneered.

“I realised that if you saw something that would cause you to doubt Abigail’s ability to take care of an animal, you would never offer her one.” Hannibal offered out a hand out to Will to help him off the floor, an olive branch. “I trusted your empathy over my own judgement—“

“Shut the fuck up, this was about manipulating me!” He managed to find the coordination to get himself off the tiles, keeping as much distance as he could from the two as he could.

Hannibal wasn’t going to give up so easily. “You have been told your whole life that what you have makes you a freak, but it doesn’t. You have a place you belong—”

“I am not a sociopath, Will!” Abigail interrupted, her voice broken and he saw that she was crying.

Instinct told him to protect her, but with the world feeling completely flipped, he couldn’t trust anything he felt for her.

Hannibal’s voice dropped to a hypnotic tone. “Will, I love you—“

“No, don’t! Don’t you dare say that to me—after I’ve spent my whole life waiting—and you know that! Don’t you dare use that against me,” he hissed.

“You believe I’m not sincere.”
“How could you be.” It wasn’t a question in Will’s mind.

“I assure you I’m quite sincere—“

Abigail in the meantime had sank down against the counters covering her ears as she sobbed. “Please don’t fight!”

“Stop crying!” Will snapped at Abigail.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hannibal bristle. “Will, do not speak to our dau—“

“Oh, stop! Stop it! You’ve—you’ve set all this shit up so that I’d feel safe, so that I’d believe you’d want this. You’re fake and so is she!”

“I am not!” she wailed, her face streaked with tears and eyes red.

The kitchen door opened and Agent Zeller entered. “Mr Pres—“

When his eyes landed on Will, his hand immediately flew to his firearm and Hannibal spoke.

“Please leave us.” Hannibal’s voice was calm and he returned his gaze to Will. “Will, put down the knife. You’re pointing it.”

Will looked down at his hand and saw he was in fact clenching a knife from the counter in his fist; it was defensive—this is how I stabbed Nicolas Boyle when he got too close—it was aggressive.

“Get out!” he snapped at Zeller.

Zeller’s hand hadn’t left his unbuttoned holster. “Abigail—“

“Just go!” she sobbed, burying her face into her hands.

Zeller looked at a loss for what to do.

“We’re having a family argument and you’re exciting him, Agent Zeller,” Hannibal warned. “Please leave us.”

Somehow, it was enough to make the agent retreat from their sight. ‘They’ve seen other First Families fight, we’re not any different,’ Will thought, the realisation like soured milk. They weren’t like other First Families—this was grave territory they’d crossed into.

“Will—“

“Don’t. Both of you stay away from me.” Back against the wall, he began to move slowly towards the door.

Hannibal took a step back as well and held his hands out to their crying daughter, but his eyes never left Will’s. “Abigail, come to me. We need to respect his wishes.” She stumbled up off the floor and allowed herself to be pulled into Hannibal’s arms and the man tried once again to speak to him.

“Will, you are upset—“

“Don’t tell me what I feel! I know who I am!”

Hannibal frowned minutely. “We love you—“

“Don’t lie to me!” he finally cried out. “Don’t lie to me!”
Abigail let out a truly heartbreaking noise—*she’s faking! None of this is real!*—and Will turned, making a break for the door.

Will picked the stairs as his method for escape; he didn’t wait for the elevator, his mind seeing himself cornered in the small space with the President, unable to find a way out as—as what? As his throat torn out? Hannibal could have killed him in the kitchen and claimed self-defense. No one would have questioned that unstable Will attacked a man he’d been far too close to and Hannibal had defended himself before—he made an anguished noise as he thought about Garrett Jacob Hobbs death. That probably had been a calculated kill, too, an opportunity to snuff someone out in public view. He swallowed painfully, his throat hurting from the acid lingering in the delicate tract. He bet if he were to look back far enough, found the right newspapers and police reports, he’d find a long history of death following Hannibal in his wake.

He reached the parking lot, almost running to his station wagon and it wasn’t until he felt someone grabbing at shoulder that he realised he’d been followed out of the Residence by a group of agents that had been trying to get his attention.

“Graham, what’s—“

“Fuck off!” He pulled out of Zeller’s grasp violently.

“Graham, talk to me!” Agent Price chimed in. “They want to pull your security pass—“

“Let them!” He pulled the one in his jacked pocket out and threw it to the ground, desperate to get out off the property.

“Why was Abigail crying, huh? What did you say to her?” Zeller’s voice was hinting towards violence.

“None of your business—“

Will found himself shoved hard against the side of his station wagon and he lashed out, trying to cuff Zeller on the side of the ear where his earpiece was.

“Zee, get off him,” Price warned, grabbing onto the other man’s arm before it could connect with Will.

Zeller wasn’t going to drop the matter. “I won’t let you—“

“What the fuck is going on out here?” Jack had stormed out into the parking lot, his opened coat billowing behind him. Immediately the agents in the parking lot drew back, watching in silent concern; there were still a few with their hands resting on their holsters.

“I’m going home!” Will snapped, fumbling with the car keys in his pocket and pressing it into the lock.

Jack grabbed him by the arm, his eyes suddenly filled with panic. “I need to talk to you. Alone. Come with me to my office.”

“No!” Will jerked his arm out of the other man’s hold. “I’m leaving and that’s fucking final!”

“Whatever’s going on—“

Will threw the door open and Jack jumped back just in time to avoid getting hit; using the time he’d bought by Jack’s shock, he climbed inside the station wagon and slammed the door, locking the
vehicle.

Jack pulled on the handle, talking to him as though he was a petulant child. “Will, come out of there and talk with me.”

Will didn’t oblige him and started the car instead. The agents that had been hovering nearby gave an even wider berth as Will put the car in reverse; Jack pounded a fist on the hood of the vehicle, but stepped back as Will began to drive to the gates at the end of the parking lot. Security had seen the commotion and were refusing to open them, even when he struck the horn repeatedly. Finally he was forced to roll down the window and he leaned out to shout back at the agents.

“Open the fucking gates or I’ll climb them!” he shouted.

Jack and the other agents finally motioned to the security box to allow him through and the gate rolled open. Hannibal’s cool and calm demeanour flooded him again and he gripped the steering wheel tightly, driving a completely reasonable speed the entire way home.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Will lie staring at the bedroom ceiling as the sun rose; he’d awoken to the alarm on his phone an hour ago, notifying him that it was time to leave for the White House. In his panic last night, he’d completely forgotten about it and now it was a painful reminder of everything that had transpired. His stomach growled loudly and he massaged the flat plane of his belly, trying to convince himself that he wasn’t hungry, because the thought of food was repulsive.

And the house felt empty without the strays.

And his bed felt cold because Hannibal wasn’t there.

Will finally forced himself to get up and put on some clothes for the day, already deciding he’d be distracting himself with the boat motor he’d brought home back in the spring and had yet to truly work on. Which made him think about the boat—his boat—that waited for him in Hyannis Port and how badly he wanted to return to it, which in turn made him think of how wonderful the summer had been, the way Hannibal had told him the boat was his, the way the they’d spent hours sailing together under a blistering sun. Which reminded him that he still had the rope bracelet on and he quickly found scissors to cut it off, tossing the worn braid into the fireplace downstairs. He’d burn it later.

His eyes stung and his throat constricted at the pain of betrayal.

There was a firm knocking on the door and Will could see a very familiar shape looming through the glass panes at the top of the door. He stared at the man on the other side and after about a minute of looking at one another through the window as he knocked, Will decided to answer. Opening the door, he stared up at Barney, who took the opportunity to remove his sunglasses. Will glanced over to the large, unmarked Secret Service SUV and though the windshield that had been heavily tinted, the lighting was just right that he could see someone in the back seat looking at him. Abigail. For one horrible—hopeful—moment he wondered if breakfast had been brought for him.

“What?” Will finally asked, already knowing the answer.

“Abigail would like to talk to you.”

He didn’t look back at the vehicle. “I don’t want to talk to her.”

“I think it might be a good idea.”

“I can’t.”

“Five minutes. I promise no more than that unless you want to keep talking.”

“You’re not going to take ‘no’ for an answer, are you?”

The agent shook his head, a grim smile stretching his lips.

Will grit his jaw. When had anyone ever denied her anything? “Fine. Five minutes.”

Barney motioned to Abigail, who leapt out of the vehicle, running up to the house. Just as she reached her arms out for him, he took a step back. She stopped, her hands dropping to her sides. The look on her face caused an actual physical jolt of pain through his stomach—*she’s faking it, she’s a liar*—and Will looked away.
“What do you want?”

“Please come back.”

“Fuck you.”

Abigail looked as though she’d been struck in the face and Barney drew himself up taller, his body now menacing and aggressive. Will flinched, eyes locked onto all the posturing of the other man, waiting to engage in fight or flight. But Abigail didn’t seem interested in retreat and turned to look the giant man who acted as her constant shadow.

“Just… go wait by the car, please.” She assured him, “I’ll be okay.”

Barney’s eyes lingered on him, but he moved slowly back to the large unmarked vehicle, never once turning his back to them. Both were very satisfied that the agent couldn’t hear them, but they kept their voices quiet.

“We’re family,” Abigail said firmly and Will looked at her in disgust.

“We’re not family.”

“Yes, we are.”

“What you and your dad have might be what you call family, but I don’t want any part of it.”

She rolled her eyes and hissed, “Are you kidding me? You’re going to let this come between us?”

“You’re—“ He glanced back over at Barney, then lowered his voice to an angry whisper as well. “It’s not some little habit I’m nitpicking over!”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. We love each other,” she snarled. “You don’t want me to get in trouble or you’d be shouting it out loud for everyone to hear!” Her expression became desperate. “You must still care about me a little.”

“Of course I do. You and your father tricked me into this.”

She grit her teeth. “Okay, so we didn’t tell you what you were eating, but that’s not lying about us loving you.”

“He pretended to let me be a parent to appease me.”

Her eyes went wide. “Don’t you dare say that. Daddy lets no one tell me what to do. Not Aunt Bee, not any of our cousins, not Alana or the Secret Service—he could have achieved all of that without letting you be my other dad. None of that was fake. I wanted you to be my dad. Daddy wanted you to be his partner, too. I was happy with that.”

“So this was some big experiment to let Hannibal Lecter play house?” Will sneered.

Abigail finally seemed at a loss for how to talk to him. “What do you want? I don’t understand. I swear to god, if you say you want ‘normal’, I’m going to scream.”

Will grit his jaw. No, yes, he wanted everything to go back to normal, but he sure as hell didn’t want to be eating people anymore.

“Do you want people who love you? I don’t understand—Will, there are people who would kill to be in the position you’re in. I’ve killed to be in the position you’re in. And we’re just handing it to
you—you’re not even having to lose anyone for this.” She closed her eyes and he saw her clench her hands into fists. “I lost my entire family for this. My dad lost his entire family for this. You—you don’t even have to give up your shitty clothes for us. You get to keep everything—“

“I am losing my moral compass and my sanity, Abigail. It’s a pretty step price to pay.”

He could see circles under her eyes and he wondered if she’d slept any.

Abigail opened her eyes. “You’re losing who you’re expected to be. Why not become who you could be?”

“Why would anyone want to become that?” He couldn’t bring himself to say ‘killer’, let alone ‘cannibal’.

She exhaled sharply, averting her eyes from him as though she was trying not to get offended by his words. “I am not what happened to me. I am what I chose to become.”

“Carl Jung.” Will had a quote of his own. “Thousands have lived without love, not one without water. W.H. Auden.”

“Living without love is like drowning.” She shook her head. “I’d rather die of thirst. And you’d want to just drown?”

“Loving the two of you is like drowning.”

“At least with us, you can get something out of it. It’s not…suffering.”

It was his turn to shake his head, wishing she’d understand. “Love is its own special kind of suffering, Abigail. You have no idea.”

“I have no idea?” Abigail snorted and threw up her hands. “I’ve lived with him for ten years. It smothers me and it kills me very slowly, but it’s all I could ever want. I’ve had the love of parents, of Marissa, of people who think they know me, but it’s nothing. Do you think Alana’s love would feel like this? Hers is like sunlight. Dad’s is like sinking into the Mariana Trench without getting to take a breath of air first.” Her eyes suddenly looked like the depths of the Styx River. “It’s dark and cold and crushes you from all sides, but you get to see what’s on the other side.”

“I don’t know if I want to see what waits at the bottom.”

“It’s beautiful, Will.” She held out her hand to show the fading scar across her palm. “I have part of you, just as you have part of me.”

He thought of the blood, looking black in the moonlight. “It’s not magic.”

“No, it’s family. You’ll have to come back.” She pulled her hand back and clasped them neatly in front of her. “I just want you to know that I forgive you for what you said last night. It was the most horrible thing anyone has said to me, but I know you were in a place of fear.”

Will’s eyes narrowed at her choice of wording. “You sound like your father.”

She looked caught, though still in pain. “Please come home.”

Will emptied all emotion from his voice. “Your five minutes are up.”

Her brow furrowed and she started to reach for him again. “Please. Please don’t—“
Will shut the door in her face, but he didn’t slam it.

*****

The text to the President was brief and concise, sent with resolution.

{Midnight. The Meyerhoff.}

*****

People were so trusting. Will had arrived when the custodian of the Meyerhoff opened the doors in expectation of the President, flashing his White House badge—“Wow, the President’s Assistant? You must love your job, man!”—and letting himself in confidently, channeling that man his mind was lost to. He informed him that the President wanted to meet on the symphony’s stage, a single light lighting the centre of the stage overhead. He dismissed the custodian after that, sending him off to welcome the Secret Service that was no doubt just arriving; Hannibal would only notify the Secret Service minutes before he wanted to leave, which meant that Will had beat him to the symphony hall, just as he wanted.

Soon enough, the doors to the massive hall opened and Hannibal walked in, escorted by seven agents; Beverly stood with him, looking at Will with an unsure expression on her face as the other agents began to clear the massive room together. That wasn’t a proper or safe procedure, but if anyone could get them to change their actions if just for the dramatic entrance alone, it would be Hannibal. Will waited patiently as it was determined all was safe and the President was allowed up onto the stage with him. Their eyes met and Hannibal understood there was no need for greetings between them.

Will nodded his head to the main entrance. “Tell them to leave.”

Hannibal looked to his agents and said in a tone that suggested there would be no argument, “We must have absolute privacy.”

Price looked uneasy, but finally ordered everyone out. Once the sound of the doors shutting echoed in the hall, Will spoke.

“How do you want me to lose myself? You’ve been trying to get me to become…” Will wanted to say ‘him’, but ‘him’ was Hannibal. “You’re trying to get that…evil inside of me.”

The other man shook his head once. “No. I’m trying to burn away the Will you think you are to show you the Will you truly are.”

Will continued staring into the red eyes that he had come to associate with comfort and joy and love and safety and…oh, he was so fucked. How could it have ever come to this?

“I’m not evil,” he said finally.

“Nor am I. We are made in God’s image, are we not?” Hannibal tilted his head. “Would you rather be alone?”

“I’m always alone.” The words stung because he had believed that for once he wasn’t.

“You don’t have to be.” He sounded so earnest, offering water to a man dying of thirst. “At a time when other men fear their isolation, yours has become understandable to you. You are alone because you are unique.” Hannibal said the words so reverently and Will hoped he wasn’t imagining the sincerity. “If you followed the urges you kept down for so long—cultivated them as the inspirations
Will pulled out something he’d kept hidden in his jacket pocket, something that he knew he could
sneak into the presence of the most powerful man in the world without being found, because it was
Hannibal Lecter himself who had granted him such unlimited, privileged access and trust. The blade
glinted in the single light of the stage and Hannibal glanced at before looking back to Will; he looked
excited.

“I used a linoleum knife. It has a sharp blade. It feels good in my hand, familiar. It’s perfect to kill Mr
Wilson.” Will circled Hannibal slowly, though he didn’t seem alarmed by the action, waiting as
always. “I bring it up to the musician’s throat and I picture his face, Will’s face. Sweet,
unsophisticated boy. I would kill thousands to continue along this path to the inevitable
consummation of our love. Surely he sees this.” Will stopped behind the other man, moving in
closer, one hand coming up slowly to bring the blade to Hannibal’s skin. “We’ll make love when I
return to him, my hands still warm with flush of death.”

As Will held the knife against the other man’s throat, blade flush with the pulse in his neck, Hannibal
spoke. “Are you a killer, Will? You. Right now. This man, standing here with me. Is this who you
really are?”

“I am who I’ve always been. The scales have just fallen from my eyes. I can see you now,” he
whispered into the President’s ear; his lips weren’t far from the spot he longed to kiss.

“What do you see?”

Will never had the chance to answer as the side exit behind him opened and they were reunited
abruptly with reality once more.

“Knife!” Zeller shouted and a loud bang went off.

Will fell to the floor, sharp pain blossoming in his chest. There was shouting and Hannibal was knelt
over him, his hands applying pressure to the gunshot wound. There were loud footsteps of agents
running down the aisles and up to the stage where they were.

The senior agent of his detail was yelling. “Mr President—“

Someone was calling for an ambulance.

“Will, please remain calm.” Hannibal’s eyes never left his. Will could see the sunset in them. “There
has been a misunderstanding, Agent Price. Will was not threatening me—he was showing me
actions of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Somewhere Zeller sounded devastated. “I thought he was—“

There was a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder—Beverly?—and Hannibal flung it away. “I’m not leaving
him.” Hannibal moved a hand up to cup his face. “Will.”

Will wondered if he stood in the box where he, Hannibal, and Abigail had watched the performance
of La Vita Nuova’s cast, that he would see himself lying in the single pool of light on the centre of
the stage, his lover over him, mourning. It would look poetic, tragic. And somewhere he could hear
the chant of vide cor meum—behold my heart—and he reached up, placing his hand over the space
Hannibal’s heart belonged, the world starting to go black.

“See?”
December 8th, 2001

Jack sits in his car, wanting to call the police—

No, he doesn’t. He wants to want to call the police, to have Hannibal locked away, to have everyone run screaming from him in the opposite direction, but he… he isn’t going do a thing about it.

He’s just watched Hannibal carry a body from the trunk of his rental car into an abandoned bus in a junkyard on the outside of town. It’s fucking freezing tonight and even though he’d prepared for that by wearing thick gloves, a hat, and his heaviest coat, his insides feel like ice water. He’d only wanted to find out what kind of prostitute Hannibal frequented or the gay lover he indulged in, maybe even discover Hannibal liked putting on high heels, he hadn’t wanted to learn that the man is a fucking psychopath.

It’s taken his SIX MONTHS to find the secret he was looking for—just as he was beginning to give up all hopes that he’d be able to find one. Knowledge is power in this game and he needs to know everything so that he can protect his candidate.

He buries his face in his hands and rocks slightly in his seat, pushing the heels of his gloved palms up into his closed eyes until the pressure causes him to see neon green and coral, then pulls his hands away and gasps at the tears welling up. This was not at all what he’d anticipated. Never in a thousand years. And for it to be Hannibal. Hannibal! Immaculate, cultured, highly educated, a loving and devoted father, celebrated surgeon, noted philanthropist—no, no, no, why did it have to be Hannibal?! And the way he’d been handling both parts of the body—because it had been sawed in half, not in a fucking single piece like a normal killer—told Jack on primal level that this wasn’t the first body Hannibal had to get rid of; Hannibal obviously intended for the body to be found, which is its own level of demented.

Jack thinks of Bedelia and a knot forms in his throat; if he backs out now, he’ll have to answer to her. She’s… her own kind of fucked up, but in a traditional politician way! Extortion, blackmail—that’s all acceptable and expected. Hannibal…

No. This is how losers talk. This is how runner-ups think. Hannibal is still a perfect politician. Everyone has their flaws. Jack should be grateful. Hannibal only has one. One flaw that no one knows about or Hannibal’s ass would already be in jail. Jack forces a smile that looks scared and pained, and huffs out a puff of breath into his frigid car. Now, what’s needed of him? First things first, clean up after his candidate. This is nothing new. This is what he does. Jack is good at cleaning up.

Getting out of his car and using a broken handled, soggy broom he finds lying half covered by the snow, begins to sweep away Hannibal’s rental’s tire tracks and foot prints. It’ll probably snow again tonight, but he’d rather be safe than sorry. Curiosity gets the better of him and carefully, he approaches the bus again as it starts to snow. He climbs inside and pulls out the small flashlight he’d brought along with him for his investigation; the man’s torso has been positioned across from his legs, two very macabre passengers. He turns off the flashlight.

Right.

Pulling out a napkin from his pocket, he wipes down all the seats and railings in the bus to remove any fingerprints, hoping to whatever God is above him that he’ll never, ever have to do this kind of...
shit again. No, he isn’t going to address it to Hannibal—“Do you think you could not kill people? It’s not popular among the 18-to-49 demographics. Or the 50-to-80, actually.”—He isn’t going to do anything that will put himself in jeopardy, either, and calling out a potential serial killer is probably the stupidest thing he could do.

He backs his own car out onto the road and sweeps away his own prints and tire tracks; he’s there about forty minutes after Hannibal had originally left, but finally feels confident that he’s done enough. The snow is coming down even heavier and is going to make driving dangerous, but at least it’ll cover up anything else that might be left. The drive home is the most excruciating experience in his life—every single light in his rearview mirror looks like police lights and his heart feels like it’s beating so fast, it will burst at any moment.

He showers in the guest bathroom, trying to wash away everything he’s seen tonight with the hottest water and small guest soaps. He shakes for a while and realises quickly that it’s even worse when he closes his eyes, so he forces them open even though he’s so drained, physically and emotionally. When he finally forces himself out of the shower, hating himself for having no intentions of calling 911, he makes his way to bedroom quietly in hopes that he won’t wake his wife. It’s a little after two in the morning at this point.

But she is awake and stirs on her half of the bed, her voice muffled from beneath the comforters and blankets. “So?”

He sets his dirty clothes by the fireplace—he’ll be burning them all in the morning while she makes breakfast. “Hmmm?”

She rolls over in the bed, blinking at him.

“Are you going to back him? The doctor?” Bella knows he spent the night trailing Hannibal to find out what kind of man he is.

Jack slips under the sheets, turning out the lamp. “Yeah. Yeah, he’s just what we need in politics.”